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Hardball diplomacy and ping-pong politics: Cuban baseball, Chinese table tennis, and the diplomatic use of sport during the Cold War

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HARDBALL DIPLOMACY AND PING-PONG POLITICS:
CUBAN BASEBALL, CHINESE TABLE TENNIS,
AND THE DIPLOMATIC USE OF SPORT DURING THE COLD WAR

A Thesis Presented

by

Matthew J. Noyes

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Department of History

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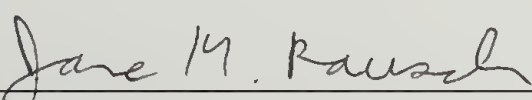
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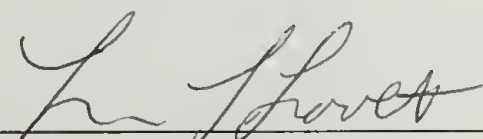
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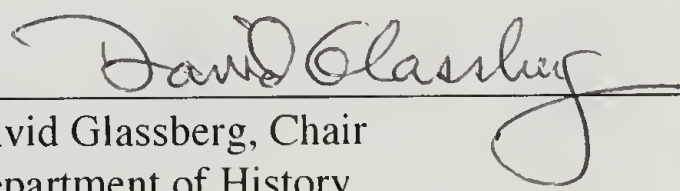
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DEDICATION

To my parents.
I can never say thank you enough for all you have done for me.

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I owe a deep debt of gratitude to a number of people without whom this thesis would never have been completed. First, to my thesis director, Ron Story, for his assistance over the past year and his guidance in my research and writing. To Jane Rausch, who has been invaluable not only as a member of this thesis committee, but also as Graduate Program Director. Thanks are also due to Laura Lovett who was willing to step into the committee at the last minute and provide comments that have strengthened my work immeasurably.

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is not simply a trivial activity or a frivolous diversion – it is an important part of the culture of a nation and a people. Over the past century, athletics have been used as a tool for both diplomacy and propaganda, a way to settle disputes and a cause of new tensions, and a force to both bring groups of people together and a way to drive a wedge between them. One thing sport has never been is wholly unimportant. Over the past two centuries, sport in the United States has evolved into an integral part of American culture and society. The evidence of this is everywhere: virtually every newspaper in the country has a section devoted to sports. A large portion of prime-time network television programming is devoted to broadcasts of sports contests; numerous radio stations devoted exclusively to sports talk and broadcasts have not only arisen, but have thrived in terms of numbers of listeners; and millions of dollars are wagered both illegally and legally on sports contests each year. If this were not proof enough, there are many more examples that could be cited.

Athletics did not always hold such a prominent place, however. In the early years of European settlement of America, sports were primarily a reflection of customs brought by settlers from their home countries. The wide dispersion of settlers and the daunting

task of taming a harsh territory precluded the establishment of a coherent sporting culture for many years.¹

As the decades passed and what was once a wild and unsettled region evolved into an established nation, the United States developed a unique sporting culture. Many forces conspired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to elevate sport from being looked down upon as merely a frivolous diversion to becoming respectable and accepted. Two of these forces were the increasing understanding within the scientific community about the workings of the human body and the rise of industrialization in the United States.²

The evolution of the medical community in the nineteenth century helped the promotion of sport in American society. As Victorian attitudes disparaging strenuous activities waned, there arose new views that sports and physical exertions were positive for the development of a healthy body. In 1872, Dr. Augustus Kinsley Gardner published *Our Children*, in which he urged boys to engage in athletics as a way to avoid sexual vice and moral decline. In the decades that followed, Americans had examples of the benefits of living a “strenuous life” from such admired figures as President Theodore Roosevelt.³

These new cultural attitudes toward the body were further promoted with the encouragement of sport by industry. Eager to exercise control over their workers, business leaders looked to sport as a way to encourage healthy amusement and to

¹ Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 17.

² Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and the American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1983), xvii.

³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

establish positive discipline and working habits.⁴ As businesses and industry established company-sponsored teams, the groundwork was established for the provincial nature of American sports as the squad from one factory faced off against that of another.

In the years before 1860, sport remained primarily regional in nature. Baseball, for example, had not codified its rules. There were differences between the “Massachusetts game” and the “New York” version.⁵ Like many other aspects of American society, the Civil War changed the nature of sport in the country. By removing men from their homes and bringing them together, certain sports began to lose their local uniqueness. For example, baseball rules were standardized to a certain degree as it was played in military camps.⁶

Other forces helped to solidify the place of sport in American society. Technological advances, such as the expansion of railroads and the development of the telegraph system, helped to both establish sport on a national basis while maintaining the ability of fans to follow local teams even as they traveled across the country to compete. The growth of colleges and universities also played a part. In 1904, 250,000 Americans were enrolled in higher education institutions. Sport had long been a part of college life, and its increasing popularity was evidenced by a sharp rise in attendance at athletic competitions.⁷

If the culture of modern American sport had its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it reached maturity in the 1920s. Journalism played a role in

⁴ Ibid., 17-18.

⁵ Allen Guttman, *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 73.

⁶ Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 183.

⁷ Ibid., 184, 188.

this, as newspapers increasingly embraced the reporting of athletics. But what sealed the place of sport in the United States was the rise of individual sports stars. Athletes such as baseball player Babe Ruth, football player Red Grange, boxer Jack Johnson, and the first female star athlete, Mildred “Babe” Didrikson, captured the public’s imagination.⁸

Undeniably, sport had become entrenched in the national consciousness.

Even with this elevation in the place of sport within American society, there was never established a national sports policy in the United States. Although many prominent American politicians and even presidents have been athletes and sports fans, there has never been the equivalent of an office of sports ministry. With the exception of athletes training for international competition as part of the Olympic Development Program, sport has been funded exclusively through private sources.⁹ In fact, there has been a consistent public outcry against public support of sports franchises when team owners have asked for public funds for assistance in building sports arenas.

The significant, although private, nature of sport in the United States presents an interesting contrast with other nations. Due to the lack of governmental influence over athletics, the United States government rarely considers sport as a tool in foreign relations. This thesis examines two cases in which American sporting culture came into contact with the athletic cultures of two other nations during the Cold War: Cuba and China. In the case of Cuba, the United States chose to not use baseball in 1959 as a way of retaining a toehold on the island in the face of a new regime that was hostile to its northern neighbor. In China, the Mao Tse Tung and Zhou Enlai effectively used table tennis to signal the US that they were willing to reopen diplomatic relations with the

⁸ Rader, 143-154.

⁹ Mandell, 275.

West. In examining each case, it becomes clear that the place of sport outside of direct governmental purview prevented it from being considered as a diplomatic tool by the US government during the Cold War.

In my work, I have relied on a combination of cultural and diplomatic sources. With respect to Cuba, much has been published about the cultural history of sport in general and baseball in particular. Three works in particular stand out: Paula Pettavino and GERALYN PYE's *Sport in Cuba: The Diamond in the Rough*, Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria's *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball*, and Milton Jamail's *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball*.¹⁰ Taken collectively, these works paint a vivid portrait of the cultural importance of baseball to the people of Cuba. I am deeply indebted to these authors for their exhaustive work at the grassroots level of Cuban society. However, these books are cultural works and largely ignore diplomatic issues. *The Pride of Havana*, for example, is an account of Echevarria's journey back to Cuba and his interviews with individuals who had memories of Cuban baseball when Americans participated. Although aspects of diplomacy are mentioned in passing, relations between the United States and Cuba are peripheral to the main goal of these works: cultural studies of the importance of baseball in Cuba. My work continues where cultural studies of Cuba during the Cold War leave off by examining relations between the US and Cuba, and by placing baseball in this context.

¹⁰ Paula J. Pettavino and GERALYN PYE, *Sport in Cuba: Diamond in the Rough* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994); Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, *The Pride of Havana: A History of Cuban Baseball* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Milton H. Jamail, *Full Count: Inside Cuban Baseball* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000).

Unfortunately, with respect to China, there has been far less written about that nation's sporting history. Still, I have been able to use Susan Brownell's *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* and Jonathan Kolatch's *Sports, Politics, and Ideology in China*¹¹ to establish a historical perspective on Chinese sport. These show the ancient roots of athletics in China and provide perspective on the role of sport under communist rule. Additionally, I use several works on the YMCA in China in the early 20th Century to establish the Western influence that existed in these years.¹² The YMCA played an important part in opening up China to the international community and introducing Western sports to the country.

To more fully understand the impact of the Cultural Revolution on Chinese society, I use Michael Sullivan's *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Ellen Johnston Liang's *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China*, and Richard Curt Kraus's *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle-Class Ambitions and the Struggle Over Western Music*.¹³ Although these works do not deal with sports directly, they help to paint a vivid picture of the cultural and societal turmoil in China during the Cultural Revolution and make it possible for the reader to more fully understand the attitudes of China toward the West in the early 1970s.

¹¹ Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); Jonathan Kolatch, *Sports, Politics and Ideology in China* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972).

¹² Chih-Kang Wu, "The Influence of the YMCA on the Development of Physical Education in China" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1957); Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution; The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China: 1919-1937* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1996).

¹³ Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Ellen Johnston Liang, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Richard Curt Kraus, *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle Class Ambitions and the Struggle over Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

For the diplomatic aspects of US relations with both Cuba and China, I draw from the *Department of State Bulletin*, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, and *Documents on American Foreign Relations*. Additionally, I have utilized monographs on the relevant diplomatic aspects of the time period, such as Thomas Paterson's *Contesting Castro*,¹⁴ Walter Isaacson's biography of Henry Kissinger,¹⁵ and several works on Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai.¹⁶ Although cultural sources are important for this thesis, it would be impossible to write effectively about the Cold War without examining diplomatic aspects of the time. The documents in particular reveal the internal debate within the US government about how best to deal with both real and perceived threats from communism, while the monograph and biographies mentioned above delve into the important personalities of the time.

The failure on the part of the US government to recognize the diplomatic potential of athletics during the Cold War proved detrimental in efforts to increase understanding between adversaries and establish a basis for peace. An examination of the missed opportunity of hardball diplomacy in Cuba and the realized potential of ping-pong politics by the Chinese helps shed light on the way in which sports were, or could have been, used in international relations during the Cold War.

¹⁴ Thomas Paterson, *Contesting Castro: The United States and the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

¹⁶ Shao Kuo-kong, *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Han Suyin, *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China, 1898-1976* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); and Dick Wilson, *Chou: The Story of Zhou Enlai, 1898-1976* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1984).

CHAPTER 1

HARDBALL DIPLOMACY

In September 1959, the Havana Cubans defeated the Minneapolis Millers in a thrilling seven-game series to claim their first ever Little World Series title. As the people of Cuba celebrated this spectacular victory by the island's unofficial national team, there was no way of knowing that the moment represented the high point of an almost seventy-year sporting relationship with the United States. In a matter of months, the newly installed revolutionary government, led by Fidel Castro, would take an increasingly radical course, which set up a diplomatic confrontation with the United States. The Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations responded to this challenge by severing all ties with the island – political, economic, diplomatic, and athletic.

The way in which the United States bungled an opportunity to use a benign tool in baseball to maintain at the minimum a diplomatic back channel with a potentially hostile revolutionary regime makes for an interesting case study of Cold War foreign policy. As we will see, US domestic politics and the perceived threat of socialism in the Western Hemisphere combined to prevent the American foreign policy elite from seeing all of its options. Despite differing political ideologies, baseball was a common ground between the United States and Fidel Castro on which the two sides might have been able to come together.

Cuban Baseball History

Sport has long been an important part of Latin American culture and society, with the United States and Europe having a profound athletic influence on the region. Many nations adopted sports from outside the region and made them part of their own culture. But these sports were not played in an effort simply to imitate the outsiders. Not all North American or European sports were universally accepted – only those that fit into existing regional culture were accepted. American football, for example, was roundly rejected by Mexico. On January 2, 1897, an exhibition game was held in Mexico. Although other sports had been widely embraced in the country, football received an extremely poor reception. Mexican newspapers derided the game as “rough as well as savage, unpolished, and dangerous,” and as “a game fit only for cowboys.”¹

Baseball, by contrast, quickly became popular around the Caribbean, and in the case of Cuba, soon rose to the level of the national sport. Bat and ball games had a long history in Latin America. In 1827, a group of British businessmen founded the Mexican Cricket Club, which was an active organization until the decline in popularity of cricket in the 1890s. By this time, British influence in Latin America was waning, while the United States began to play a more active role. Baseball appeared in the 1880s, with the first documented Mexican game in 1882. By 1890, the game was widespread throughout the nation.²

Baseball in Cuba had roots that went back even further. As early as 1860, American sailors brought the game to the island. In 1887, the Philadelphia Athletics

¹ William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 20, 56.

² *Ibid.*, 18-19.

toured Cuba, inspiring additional baseball interest in Cuba. After the US professionals went back to America, the sport's popularity exploded, and Cuban club teams regularly drew crowds of 15,000 to 20,000 fans for their games.³ The sport soon caught on and the first national championship took place in 1888.⁴ The cultural impact of the American game became apparent as words such as *jonron* (homerun) and *doble plei* (double play) cropped up in the language of the Cuban people.⁵

By the 1940s, Cuba had evolved into an extended talent pool for US ball clubs. The warm Caribbean climate provided an opportunity for American players to participate in the Cuban winter league. Racial attitudes and prejudices in the United States helped transform Cuban baseball into an athletic contact zone between the two nations.⁶ Because racial segregation did not exist in Cuba, baseball games on the island presented a unique opportunity for both white and black players. Although African-Americans and black Cubans were forbidden from playing against white players in the United States, Major League all-stars played with and against blacks in Cuba. Even the notoriously racist Ty Cobb toured Cuba and played against black Cubans.⁷ By playing outside of the United States, whites and blacks were able to avoid the color barrier and play desegregated games.⁸

³ Beezley, 20.

⁴ Patterson, 49.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁶ Reference to the "contact zone" refers to areas of intersection between the United States and Latin American nations where cultures come into contact with each other, and each is influenced by the other. For more on this concept see: Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁷ Patterson, 49.

⁸ Pettavino and Pye, 26.

When Brooklyn Dodgers' executive Branch Rickey sought a player to break the baseball color line, he initially considered the legendary Cuban player Silvio Garcia. To gauge Garcia's temperament, Rickey asked how he would respond if he were slapped by a white man. Without hesitation, Garcia responded, "I kill him." Rickey decided that Garcia was not the best candidate to be the first black player in the major leagues, and decided to go with Jackie Robinson instead.⁹ Although he did not use a Cuban player to challenge American racial divisions, Rickey recognized the unique opportunity presented by Cuba to introduce Robinson more gradually to integrated play by having him participate in the Cuban winter league. By doing so, Robinson became acclimated to competing with white players, while avoiding racist white fans.¹⁰

Cuban baseball fans acquired a reputation for being extremely sophisticated about their sport. They not only attended local games in large numbers, but also closely followed American teams. Many Cubans even collected American baseball cards, baseball magazines, and yearbooks of American teams. Technology also played an important role in the increasing passion for baseball. By 1951, Cuba boasted over 14,000 television sets and over 575,000 radios. Broadcasts of baseball games, both in Cuba and the United States, made up a large portion of the programming schedule on the island.¹¹

The popularity of the Cuban winter league reached such a height in the 1950s that restaurant and club owners in Havana petitioned the league to reduce the number of games per week from six to three, claiming that they were losing business. The request

⁹ Patterson, 49.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Echevarria, 299-300.

was refused.¹² It was not uncommon for Cuban president Fulgencia Batista to attend games in person. Although student protesters who rushed the field with banners and fireworks frequently interrupted these games, Batista did nothing to stop them. One American player speculated that the President simply did not consider these protests as representing a serious threat to his regime.¹³

The novelty of Cuban obsession with American baseball was treated with a typically paternalistic attitude by the US press. A 1954 article in *Life* magazine described Latin American baseball games as “barely controlled chaos,” as if one was caught up in a revolutionary mob. The article spoke of fans trying to overwhelm their team’s opponents with noise, using “crude cymbals” (pots and pans), foghorns, and whistles. The author mentioned frequent fistfights in the stands and the need for barbed wire to keep fans in the cheap seats away from the rich. Finally, and perhaps most striking from a modern perspective, was the article’s focus on a “bizarre” sign that lit up when a home run was hit – much like scoreboard pyrotechnics that have been developed for American stadiums over the past two decades.¹⁴ Six years later, *Time* took a similar attitude toward Latin American fans. Instead of highlighting the fans’ knowledge of the game, the focus was on the tendency by Cuban spectators to salute good plays with roman candles.¹⁵

Regardless of the American media’s attitude toward Latin American fans, Cubans were accustomed to a high quality of play. Cuban baseball was an impressive affair by the 1940s. All four teams that made up the Cuban League (Havana, Almendares,

¹² Pettavino and Pye, 36.

¹³ Don Hoak and Myron Cope, “The Day I Batted Against Castro,” in *The Baseball Reader*, ed Charles Einstien (New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980), 177.

¹⁴ “Baseball With A Rumba Beat,” *Life*, 22 February 1954, 136.

¹⁵ “El Beisbol,” *Time*, 29 February 1960, 60.

Mariano, and Cienfuegos) played in El Gran Stadium in Havana on a rotating schedule. Games were held on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, with the players taking Fridays and Saturdays off. On Sundays, a double-header would be played, followed by another day off on Mondays. Virtually every game was sold out.¹⁶

In the early 1950s, the Cuban League began to attract top-notch American talent for the winter season. Former major leaguer Don Hoak wrote, “Cuba was an American baseball player’s paradise.” Hoak was paid upwards of \$800 per month by the Cuban owner of the team for which he played, significantly higher than his American minor league salary at the time. Other teams paid their American imports even better. The Cienfuegos club typically paid players \$1,000 a month plus \$350 in expenses. Additional benefits included reduced rent on an ocean side cottage plus a housekeeper and a personal security guard, special treatment at Cuban casinos, and banquets held in honor of American ballplayers.¹⁷ This is not to say that American players got a free ride in Cuba. Fans on the island expected high-quality performances on the field. It was not uncommon for an American player who failed to produce to be sent home in the middle of the season.¹⁸

Still, Cuban baseball became so attractive to Americans that Organized Baseball¹⁹ had to put limits on their players to preserve the primacy of American baseball. Only minor leaguers and players with less than 45 days in the majors were allowed to participate in the Cuban winter league. Although all Cuban-born major leaguers were

¹⁶ Jamail, 22.

¹⁷ Hoak and Cope, 176-177; Echevarria, 305.

¹⁸ Echevarria, 307.

¹⁹ The term “Organized Baseball” refers to the collective organizations making up professional baseball in the United States. In other words, Organized Baseball is the combination of Major League Baseball and its affiliated minor leagues.

allowed to play winter ball, their major league club was given the right of first refusal to prevent them from playing during the winter. Additionally, winter league team owners agreed to accept a salary cap for American players. This cap, however, was frequently exceeded by under the table payments, which allowed US players to make more for a few months of work in Cuba than they were able to make the rest of the year in the United States.²⁰

The 1950s became known as the Age of Gold not only for American ball players in Cuba, but for Cuban players as well. Salaries for US players were capped at \$1,800, while Cuban players were paid as much as \$2,400 a month, depending on their skill level. This was an extremely lucrative financial reward at a time when the average Cuban teacher made around \$200 a month.²¹

Baseball in Cuba, and the US involvement in it, was not limited to the winter months. In 1946, the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues sanctioned the establishment of a minor league franchise in Cuba – the Havana Cubans. Quickly nicknamed the “Sugar Kings” by Cuban fans, the Havana club enjoyed great success in the Class B Florida International League. Competing against American-based franchises, the Sugar Kings consistently won the league title each of the first five years of its existence and had the league’s highest attendance.²²

The Sugar Kings were a farm club of the Washington Senators of the American League. Because no other major league club showed interest in the island, the Senators unofficially enjoyed exclusive rights to talent scouting in Cuba for many years. Driven

²⁰ Echevarria, 306, 304.

²¹ Ibid., 304.

²² Jamail, 23; Pettavino and Pye, 36.

by the tireless efforts of scout Joe Cambria, there existed a virtual pipeline between Havana and Washington, DC for Cuban ball players. The culmination of this scouting effort came on July 23, 1960, over eighteen months after the Fidel Castro-led revolution, when the Senators turned the only major league all-Cuban triple play. Whitey Herzog of the Kansas City Royals hit a line drive to pitcher Pedro Ramos who threw to first baseman Julio Becquer for the second out, who then relayed the ball to shortstop Jose Valdivielso covering second to complete the play.²³

The Sugar Kings competed in the Florida International League for eight seasons, from 1946 to 1953. Following the 1953 season, Cornell-educated Cuban businessman and baseball aficionado Roberto “Bobby” Maduro purchased the team from Washington Senators owner Clark Griffith.²⁴ Maduro wanted to elevate the quality of play beyond the Class B level of the Florida league and take the team to Triple A, the highest level of minor league baseball. His long-term goal, however, was not to simply have high-quality minor league baseball in Cuba. Rather, Maduro’s express purpose in purchasing the Sugar Kings, as we will see, was to put the franchise into a position where it could potentially join the major leagues.²⁵

Maduro moved to sever all ties between the Sugar Kings and its former parent team, the Senators. Because the Senators still looked at Cuba as their main scouting ground even after the sale of the Havana team, Maduro believed that they would never allow Cuba to be home to a major league franchise. He feared that if he maintained the team’s affiliation with Washington, the Senators would be afraid to lose their exclusive

²³ Jamail, 119.

²⁴ Pettavino and Pye, 36.

²⁵ Echevarria, 336.

access to Cuban players. Based on this theory, he approached the Cincinnati Reds of the National League to become the new parent club for the Sugar Kings. Since the Reds did not have the same historical ties to Cuba as the Senators, Maduro thought that the Cincinnati ownership would not stand in the way of the Sugar Kings' potential future elevation.²⁶

Still, there remained significant barriers to the Kings becoming a Triple A club. First, Maduro had to secure the team's release from the Florida International League. After intense negotiations with League president Phil O'Connell, Maduro reportedly agreed to pay between \$20,000 and \$25,000 for the release.²⁷ Maduro then faced the problem of being allowed to enter Triple A. He had his eye on the International League (IL), widely considered to be the premiere minor league circuit. But because the IL was primarily made up of northern clubs, league officials were hesitant to allow Havana in. Only a combination of luck, good timing, and a willingness to pay helped Maduro overcome this obstacle. The Sugar Kings were allowed to join the IL when Richmond, a mid-way city between the northern clubs and Havana, joined the league. Havana was then permitted to replace a Springfield, Massachusetts team that folded because of poor attendance. To ease the transition, Maduro paid \$60,000 to the league to help alleviate travel expenses that would be incurred by each team when they traveled to Havana. Additionally, Maduro gave assurances that he would work to eliminate gambling at the stadium and thereby preserve the purity of the game.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid, 337.

²⁷ "Florida League Releases Havana," *New York Times*, 10 January 1954.

²⁸ "International League Considers Franchise For Havana as well as Richmond Next Year," *New York Times*, 7 November 1953; Bill O'Neal, *The International League: A Baseball History, 1884-1991* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1992), 155.

Having successfully negotiated the minefields of Organized Baseball, the Havana Sugar Kings entered the International League in 1954. The team was a success, routinely selling out the 35,000 seat El Gran Stadium. Maduro was heard to say, “One more step and we get there,” in reference to his dream of bringing major league baseball to Cuba.²⁹

Although Maduro’s vision may now appear unrealistic, in the mid-1950s it was reasonable to expect that Havana might someday boast its own major league baseball franchise. American baseball was experiencing what would later be called its own Golden Age. Attendance and interest were high, and thanks to the end of World War II, top-notch talents, such as Red Sox slugger Ted Williams, were out of the service and back on the field. Mainstream sporting publications, such as the newly created *Sports Illustrated*, speculated about the potential expansion of major league baseball. To some, Havana represented a natural location for a new club. In 1954, *Newsweek* published an article about possible baseball expansion. The previous season, new teams had gone to Baltimore and Milwaukee. Given Maduro’s purchase of the Sugar Kings and their elevation to Triple A status, the article put forward Havana as a possible place for expansion should major league baseball look outside US borders.³⁰ Havana stacked up well even against US cities vying for baseball franchises. One proposal for major league expansion would have increased the number of leagues from two to five, based on geographic location. Of the cities that would have made up the Southern League under

²⁹ Echevarria, 336; Patterson, 50.

³⁰ “Changing Pattern,” *Newsweek*, 25 January 1954, 88.

this plan, Havana boasted better annual attendance than minor league teams in three: Atlanta, Birmingham, and Louisville.³¹

By 1959, the number of potential new leagues had been reduced from three to one. Still, expansion was being seriously considered and Organized Baseball established certain minimum criteria in order for a city to be considered for a franchise. Kansas City, the smallest of all major league cities, was put forward as the floor for both metropolis population (515,000) and ballpark seating (25,000). A number of other North American cities were actively considered as potential expansion sites: Toronto, Montreal, Buffalo, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Seattle, Denver, New Orleans, Dallas, and Fort Worth.³² Given the long history and popularity of baseball in Cuba, and the close relationship between the island and Organized Baseball, Maduro had every reason to believe that his was at least as strong a case for expansion than a number of these other cities.

On the eve of the Revolution, then, even as diplomatic ties were being strained by political events, athletic relations between the US and Cuba remained strong. Cubans loved American baseball and baseball players. Havana had joined the highest levels of minor league baseball and was holding its own with its US rivals. There existed a mutually beneficial relationship on the baseball diamond that had signs of potentially evolving into one of full-fledged equality if Havana was able to become the location for major league expansion. Unfortunately, like all other relations between the United States and Cuba, these athletic circumstances were to be thrown asunder after January 1, 1959, when Batista's regime collapsed.

³¹ Charles Einstein, "The Geopolitics of Baseball," *The Reporter*, 11 August 1955, 45.

³² "Notes on the Third League Theme," *Sports Illustrated*, 1 June 1959, 31.

Baseball and Revolution

It would be difficult to argue either that the American public was unaware of problems with the Batista regime or that the 1959 Revolution was entirely unexpected. As early as the mid-1950s, popular news magazines published articles deriding both the nature of the dictator's rule and the instability of his administration. A 1954 article in *The Reporter*³³ called US support for the Cuban leadership into question. In particular, the article criticized the way in which Batista came to power – by undermining the beginnings of constitutional democracy and staging a coup. Additionally, *The Reporter* questioned the regime's commitment to protecting civil liberties and its claims to be stamping out Communism on the island. The article claimed that Batista only paid lip service to the idea of personal freedoms in Cuba and thought nothing of using force to repress opposition. It concluded that if Cuba's economic conditions were to deteriorate, a coup was likely. But so long as the United States continued to prop up sugar prices, the Cuban people would remain apathetic rather than agitated.³⁴ This situation was clearly not a description of a desirable ally for the United States.

This article was not the first instance of speculation about Batista's eventual overthrow. Over a year before the publication of *The Reporter* piece, *US News & World Report* ran a story entitled, "Cuban Revolt: When, Not If." While this article acknowledged some of the positive accomplishments of Batista's rule (increased stability of the sugar market, reductions in gang warfare, and improvements to United Railways of

³³ *The Reporter* was a bi-weekly news magazine published in New York from 1949-1968.

³⁴ Oden Meeker, "Cuba Under Batista: More Apathy Than Disaffection," *The Reporter*, 14 September 1954, 21-23.

Cuba), it too saw the roots of potential unrest in Cuba. Batista's increasing reliance on the police and military indicated popular dissatisfaction with the regime. Although the article did not mention Castro by name, it pointed to the July attack on a remote army outpost by rebels, who would later become known as the July 26 movement, as a sign of Batista's tenuous hold on power. That these rebels quickly gained sympathy gave the reporter the impression that the majority of the Cuban people supported Batista's overthrow.³⁵

Herbert Matthews, a reporter for the *New York Times*, was significant in influencing US public opinion about Cuban politics. Matthews was not an objective observer in his writing about the Cuban Revolution. In his memoirs, he described Castro as one of the two or three greatest and most positive figures in Latin American history and concluded that the 1959 Revolution was the greatest event in the region since the 1910 Mexican Revolution.³⁶ Even conceding his bias, one cannot simply dismiss the importance and impact of Matthews's writing. He wrote front-page articles in the daily newspaper with one of the highest circulations in the United States. In February 1957, the *New York Times* published a series of articles written by Matthews after his trip to Cuba. During this trip, he spent time both in Havana observing the Batista regime, and in the Sierra Maestra mountains with Castro and his band of revolutionaries. Matthews's stories were contained a stinging indictment of Batista and high praise for Castro. He

³⁵ "Cuban Revolt: When, Not If," *US News and World Report*, 14 August 1953, 42-45.

³⁶ Herbert Matthews, *A World In Revolution: A Newspaperman's Memoir* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 254.

found resentment among the Cuban people toward the United States for its backing of a “menace of a military dictatorship,” and an “old corrupt order.”³⁷

Matthews’s time with Castro in the mountains served to convince him of the righteousness of the rebels’ cause and the probability of their victory. He wrote that Batista had no chance of defeating them militarily; that the Cuban army’s only hope was to stumble on the rebels by chance and then wipe them out. So long as the July 26th Movement continued its guerrilla tactics, they were virtually guaranteed victory. Matthews also went to great lengths to reassure the American public that Castro did not hate the United States. The rebels, he wrote, were nationalist, an attitude which was interpreted in the US as anti-Yankee. Still, Matthews maintained, they were anti-Communist. Matthews quoted Castro as saying, “You can be sure that we have no animosity toward the United States and the American people.” Castro’s only goal, Matthews maintained, was the establishment of democracy and the end to dictatorship.³⁸

Although the American media put forth a positive message with regard to the nature of the growing unrest in Cuba, the American government’s view was colored by a Cold War obsession with the spread of Communism and memories of previous Latin American revolutions. The 1944 Guatemalan revolution had brought Juan Arevalo Bermejo into power. Arevalo forced the United Fruit Company to rent out a portion of its lands, and the company convinced the US government that Communists had taken control of Guatemala. To protect the lands and property of US-based corporations, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations took direct action against the Guatemalan

³⁷ Herbert Matthews, “Old Order in Cuba is Threatened by Forces of an Internal Revolt,” *New York Times*, 26 February 1957, 13.

³⁸ Herbert Matthews, “Cuban Rebel is Visited in Hideout,” *New York Times*, 24 February 1957, 34.

government, culminating in a CIA-backed coup attempt.³⁹ In this way, a precedent had been set about how to deal with the specter of Communism in Latin America – it had to be confronted with subversion and military force by the United States.

In a 1958 statement of policy in Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter American Affairs Roy Rubottom, Jr. echoed the apparent lessons learned from Guatemala and cast doubts about Fidel Castro's anti-Communist pronouncements. According to Rubottom, the Soviet Union was actively giving aid to Latin American nations to turn the region against the United States. Russia was using labor unions, student groups, and the media to create chaos and break down the currently stable conditions under Batista. Assertions of rebellion based on nationalistic principles had to be examined critically, according to Rubottom: "Communists use nationalism as a Trojan horse of political penetration."⁴⁰

Secretary of State Christian Herter, who served in the Eisenhower Administration during these years, took a similar line in his book, *Toward an Atlantic Community*. Herter wrote that the Communist bloc had greatly expanded its physical territory by force of arms. Cuba was taken over by "internal subversion and infiltration, and not by external military aggression." The Cuban Revolution, he believed, was camouflaged in its early stages. Castro used anti-Communist rhetoric and democratic principles to lull the United States into a false sense of security about what he was attempting. In the end,

³⁹ Jerald A. Combs, *The History of American Foreign Policy; Volume II: Since 1900* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997), 365-366.

⁴⁰ Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., "Communism in the Americas," 3 February 1958, *Department of State Bulletin: 1958* (Washington: Office of Public Communication, Bureau of Public Affairs: 1958), 181-185.

though, Herter wrote, the Revolution was revealed for what it was – Communist inspired and driven. It was designed to serve Soviet interests, not Cuban.⁴¹

These attitudes toward Communism in general and the Cuban Revolution in particular trickled down from the top levels of the US government to those in the trenches of the Foreign Service. Earl Smith served as US ambassador to Cuba from 1957 to January 1959.⁴² Long before Castro made any public announcements of Communist intent, Smith concluded that the July 26 Movement had to be opposed by the United States at all costs. Shortly after taking over the diplomatic post in Havana, Smith formed an advisory group made up of US businessmen to assess the situation in Cuba. In November 1958, they concluded that the US government had to keep Batista in power.⁴³ Smith believed that Batista was a better ally for the United States than Castro, mainly because he had never allowed Communist nations to have embassies in Havana, and had therefore helped America during the Cold War. This, according to Smith, was in sharp contrast to the actions of Castro when he later took the reins of power.⁴⁴ Although Smith acknowledged that Batista was a “ruthless dictator,” he was still a better ruler than Castro because of Batista’s decision to outlaw the death penalty. Smith blamed the United States for not extending sufficient assistance to the Batista regime in order to preserve its place in Havana.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Christian Herter, *Toward an Atlantic Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 8-10.

⁴² For a more complete and particularly compelling account of Ambassador Smith’s failures in Cuba, see Paterson, *Contesting Castro*, 109-121.

⁴³ Earl ET Smith, *The Fourth Floor: An Account of the Castro Communist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1962), 161.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

But these were retrospective assessments of Batista and Castro. While he served as ambassador, Smith did everything in his power to alienate Castro and to foster an environment of animosity between the United States and the July 26 Movement. In January 1958, Smith stated in an interview that the US could only deal with governments that honored international law and maintained law and order. Castro, he stated, was incapable of doing either. Word of these statements soon got back to Castro, a University of Havana-educated attorney, who in turn became convinced of American hostility toward his movement.⁴⁶ Even as the July 26 Movement gained strength and popular support throughout 1958, Smith consistently refused to speak to Castro. Smith claimed to be put off by Castro's remarks that there would be "200,000 dead gringos" if the United States intervened in the revolution. Believing that these remarks were "disrespectful," Smith stated that a meeting between himself and Castro would serve "no useful purpose."⁴⁷ In the end, however, Castro's revolution was triumphant, and Smith had so poisoned the environment as to destroy his own usefulness to the United States in Cuba. Recognizing that Castro would never deal with him in any sort of productive diplomatic manner, Smith offered his resignation to President Eisenhower. It was accepted on January 10, 1959.⁴⁸

The period preceding the 1959 Revolution was one of disconnect between the information that the American public received from the media and the attitudes of the US government. Given the depictions of the Batista regime and the July 26 Movement, it is possible that the American public may have been receptive to regime change in Cuba.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 60-61.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 199.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 204.

What was necessary was a brave individual, or group of individuals, within the government to go against the tide of Cold War politics. Instead, diplomatic decisions were continually driven by an obsession with the perceived spread of Communism. Because the stakes were raised due to the geographic proximity of Cuba to the United States, American officials were deathly afraid of any sort of left-leaning movement that threatened their hand-picked right-wing dictator. This is the first tragedy of American diplomacy with regards to Cuba: that the State Department missed an opportunity to at least remain neutral toward an internally popular rebellion whose rhetoric promised an improvement of living conditions for the mass of Cuban people. Although Castro's later pronouncement of his own socialist nature precluded a close alliance between the United States and Cuba, a more accommodating posture in the early days of the 1959 Revolution may have prevented the complete souring of diplomatic relations. Instead, the US chose to entrench itself further in the Cold War mentality and helped create an enemy only ninety miles off the coast of Florida.

In the years preceding the 1959 Revolution, Roberto Maduro had high hopes for the success of the Sugar Kings. In terms of popularity in Havana, many Cubans were already familiar with the team's players from their participation in the Cuban winter league. Additionally, the International League held exhibition games in Cuba featuring the Montreal Dodgers and the Rochester Cardinals.⁴⁹ But after initial success, the novelty of American minor league baseball wore off, and by the late 1950s, the Sugar Kings were not able to draw the crowds that they had hoped for. There were several reasons for this drop in attendance. First, Cubans were accustomed to baseball primarily

⁴⁹ Echevarria, 337.

in the form of the winter league. Despite its popularity, it was difficult to sustain enthusiasm for the sport year round. Additionally, Cuban fans were used to top-notch talent. The Cuban winter league routinely attracted the best minor league players from all over the United States. Although the International League was one of the best minor leagues, the drop in quality of play from the Winter League was noticeable. It was difficult to attract fans to games during a non-traditional time of year featuring second-rate talent.⁵⁰

Political unrest, however, had not historically affected baseball in Cuba. Batista's 1952 coup occurred during the baseball off-season and in the late 1950s, the July 26 rebels were situated mainly in Oriente Province, far away from Havana and the Sugar Kings' games.⁵¹ In fact, the rebellion in the late 1950s was impacted more by baseball than the other way around. During the baseball season, radio broadcasts of games were so popular that government troops often were reluctant to leave their barracks to fight the rebels.⁵²

Although Maduro dismissed the danger posed by the rebels in April 1958, saying, "Why the rebels are 750 miles from Havana in the mountains,"⁵³ American teams were concerned about playing ball in Cuba. On April 7, the International League (IL) owners met to decide what course of action should be taken with respect to Cuba. After much deliberation, all owners decided to go ahead with opening the season in Havana as scheduled. League president Frank J. Shaughnessy summed up the sentiment by saying

⁵⁰ Ibid., 339.

⁵¹ Ibid., 302.

⁵² Robert E. Quirk, *Fidel Castro* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1993), 183.

⁵³ It is likely that Maduro was exaggerating the geographic distance from Havana for effect. "League Confirms Opener in Havana," *New York Times*, 7 April 1958, 32.

that games would continue to be played in Havana, “unless conditions materially change.” When asked what would constitute a material change, he responded, “Shooting people down there.”⁵⁴ It was clear from this remark that although Organized Baseball professed a commitment to continue play in Cuba, there remained significant concerns about the physical safety of players, coaches, and others involved with the games.

The unanimous decision by the league owners represented a reversal on the part of Buffalo owner John Stiglmeirer, whose team was scheduled to open the IL season in Havana. Initially, Stiglmeirer had been worried about his team being used as “guinea pigs” to see if the situation in Havana was truly dangerous. However, after the meeting, he appeared to have been convinced by Maduro that despite the fighting in Oriente, Havana remained safe.⁵⁵

A week later, however, Stiglmeirer changed his mind yet again. Persuaded by his players who expressed trepidation over the ongoing revolution, the Buffalo owner informed IL officials that his team would not play. Despite assurances of safety from Ambassador Smith and the threat of financial penalties (\$2,000 fine, loss of a \$25,000 bond, and loss of the franchise), Buffalo maintained that it would not play. Maduro’s response was that although the conditions were safe, his team would be happy to get four wins via forfeit.⁵⁶ In the end, however, play continued as planned. Shaughnessy made a personal trip to Havana to assess the actual conditions on the ground and found the city to be safe for the players. Reluctantly, Buffalo made the trip south and played the series

⁵⁴ “League Confirms Opener in Havana,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1958, 32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “Buffalo Refuses to Play Ball in Cuba Despite League’s Threat of Penalties,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1958, 30.

without incident. To prove that the conditions were safe, Ambassador Smith even threw out the first pitch.⁵⁷

Despite the increasing instability of the Batista regime and the growing strength of Castro and the July 26 Movement, Cuban baseball remained unaffected by the political situation throughout 1958. Although the Sugar Kings finished last in the IL standings, total attendance doubled to 178,340 for the season. Even the collapse of Batista's government on January 1, 1959 resulted in a minimal disruption to baseball. Only five winter league games had to be cancelled, while restaurants and nightclubs in Havana remained full.⁵⁸

Still, as Cuban baseball fans celebrated Castro's victory and reveled in the peaceful, carnival-like atmosphere of Havana, Organized Baseball grew concerned. Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick and Washington Senators owner Calvin Griffith ordered all American players to leave Cuba and not to participate in the remainder of the winter league season. After receiving guarantees of safety from the new government, however, almost all players chose to remain, and finished the season without incident.⁵⁹

By the time major league spring training started in March 1959, it appeared that Organized Baseball was comfortable with the political situation in Cuba. Because of a string of consecutive rainy days in Florida, Cincinnati Reds owner Gabe Paul called Maduro to see if the Reds could make up some of its pre-season games in Havana against the Dodgers. Maduro was delighted to host the big league teams and Cuban fans packed

⁵⁷ Quirk, 178.

⁵⁸ Echevarria, 332.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 332.

the stands at El Gran Stadium. It was to be the last time any major league team was to play in Cuba until the Baltimore Orioles traveled there in 1999.⁶⁰

Organized Baseball's accommodation with Cuban politics was short lived, however. In early April, there was a fresh outbreak of violence on the island. Several IL clubs expressed concern for their players' safety if the season was to go forward as planned. Frank Shaughnessy said, "If there's real trouble, we're not going to open – but I want to be sure."⁶¹ In the days immediately following that statement, Shaughnessy consulted with a number of individuals in Havana and received universal support for going ahead with the season in Cuba. As expected, Maduro reassured the league president about the safety of the city. But what appears to have been the most convincing element was the reassurance that Shaughnessy received from Ambassador Smith. In a release from the American Embassy in Cuba, Smith asked rhetorically, "If children can play in the streets of the city, why can't grown men play in the stadium?"⁶²

Still, the Buffalo Bison players remained concerned and security had to be increased around the team. A police escort was provided for the team for their entire stay in Cuba, and detectives were stationed in the Bison dugout during the games for the opening series.⁶³ Despite these precautions, the 1959 season began without incident on April 15. The opening game was an international event with Castro himself throwing out the first pitch. The US, Canadian, Mexican, and Venezuelan ambassadors were invited

⁶⁰ Jamail, 122.

⁶¹ "Havana Play in Doubt," *New York Times*, 10 April 1959.

⁶² "Castro Makes a Pitch," *New York Times*, 15 April 1959, 38.

⁶³ Paterson, 146.

onto the field for a pre-game ceremony. Fears of violence virtually evaporated for the next several months.⁶⁴

Shortly after taking power in January 1959, Castro made it clear that he wanted the Sugar Kings to stay in Havana. He stated that he would do everything in his power to make sure that the team remained, “even if I have to pitch.”⁶⁵ Castro was perhaps the Sugar Kings’ biggest fan. It was not at all uncommon to see the rebel leader in the stands, usually accompanied by former Cuban star player, Pedro Formanthal.⁶⁶

Fidel Castro’s passion for baseball had not always been limited to watching from the stands. In his pre-revolutionary days, he was a talented pitcher on the Cuban circuit. In 1948, when he was a 21-year-old college student, Castro was the star pitcher for the University of Havana. His abilities soon drew attention from American scouts. Those who met him found Castro to be polite and well spoken. In November 1948, Castro pitched against a team of touring major leaguers. He struck out four of the sixteen batters he faced, including future Hall of Fame outfielder Hank Greenberg. He gave up three hits, but no walks and no runs. Castro’s success continued throughout the University season, where he was virtually unhittable against local talent, compiling a record of nine wins and two losses. During the City League that year, he continued to improve, putting together a 12-1 record.⁶⁷

Although he displayed an excellent curveball and a strong fastball, many American scouts began to lose interest in Castro after 1948, as he did not throw as hard as

⁶⁴ “Castro Makes a Pitch,” *New York Times*, 15 April 1959, 38.

⁶⁵ Bruce Brown, “Cuban Baseball,” *The Atlantic*, June 1984, 112.

⁶⁶ Hoak and Cope, 177.

⁶⁷ David J. Truby, “Now Pitching for the Giants ... Fidel Castro,” *Sports History*, March 1989, 12.

the legendary Bob Feller. The Giants were the one team to maintain interest, calling him a “serious prospect” and “stable.” Scout Horace C. Stoneham thought that he had a good chance of making it to the majors. The Giants offered Castro a lucrative contract that included a \$5,000 signing bonus. The young pitcher pondered the offer for a few days, but turned it down. The Giants were stunned. It was the first time a Latin ballplayer had ever said no. Castro was, by the Giants’ own account, very polite, but insisted that he wanted to help people by getting his law degree. Baseball, he said, was just for fun.⁶⁸

In 1959, following the July 26 Movement’s success, some of the older scouts within the Giants organization thought that they remembered the name Castro from years before. They went back through their records and found that the new Cuban leader was indeed the same man that they had scouted and recruited almost a dozen years before. Looking back, Stoneham said he had no doubt that if Castro had had the same drive and determination for baseball, he would have made it to the majors.⁶⁹

Although Castro never fully pursued a path that might have led him to play major league baseball in the United States, he continued to enjoy the game and on occasion was known to play from time to time. At one point during the 1959 Revolution, Castro interrupted a winter league game and strode to the pitcher’s mound, demanding the ball. He threw three pitches to Don Hoak, an American ballplayer before the umpire convinced the rebel leader to leave the field.⁷⁰ To the present day, Castro continues to be passionate about baseball and by many accounts, takes pride in the success of the Cuban national team.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

⁷⁰ Don Hoak and Myron Cope, “The Day I Batted Against Castro,” in Charles Einstein, ed. *The Baseball Reader* (New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980), 176-180.

On April 23, 1959, Maduro met with Castro in Havana. The Maximum Leader reiterated his earlier position that he would not allow political unrest to drive the team out of Cuba. Maduro and Castro held a press conference immediately following their meeting at which they announced that they were working to develop a plan to keep the Havana franchise in the International League for the foreseeable future, and to later have it elevated to the majors if a third league were formed.⁷¹

It became clear, however, that baseball could not be fully isolated from growing violence on the island. On July 1, the same night that the Bisons beat the Sugar Kings 5-2, the brother of a presidential candidate backed by Batista was gunned down on a Havana street.⁷² While this event did not have a direct impact on the ballplayers themselves, violence spilled over to the playing field on July 24. That night, as Rochester was playing Havana in El Gran Stadium, a celebration of the rebel victory spiraled out of control as shots were fired from the stands, hitting the Rochester third base coach and grazing two other Rochester players. The game was stopped and the Rochester club left Cuba the next day, forfeiting their remaining games. Shaughnessy had to work hard to convince the other teams in the league to make the trip to Cuba. Armed guards were assigned to the stadium, and increased security became the norm for the rest of the season.⁷³ From the steps taken by the International League, it appears that Shaughnessy and Organized Baseball were committed to keeping the Sugar Kings in Havana, even in the face of violence.

⁷¹ <http://www.baseballlibrary.com>; "Havana Team to Stay," *New York Times*, 24 April 1959, 33.

⁷² Patterson, 167.

⁷³ Quirk, 252; O'Neal, 162.

Despite the shooting and the Rochester forfeit, the IL regular season came to a close with Havana in third place, qualifying the Sugar Kings for the playoffs. In the first round, the Sugar Kings beat Buffalo to advance to the championship series against the Minneapolis Millers. The first two games of the series were played in Minnesota before anemic crowds barely totaling 3,000 fans. Because of cold weather, IL officials decided that the remaining games would take place in Havana. The response from Cuban fans was overwhelming – over 100,000 Cubans came out for the final five games of the series.⁷⁴

These games at El Gran Stadium were hugely significant social events in Cuba. Both Ambassador Bonsal, the newly appointed diplomat following Ambassador Smith's resignation, and Castro attended the games. Bonsal's attendance was the source of some tension following an enthusiastic ovation when he was introduced. Castro, never one to allow himself to be upstaged, thought it was too much. Castro became so involved in the series that he even watched games five and six from the Sugar Kings' dugout, giving advice to the team's manager on several occasions.⁷⁵ The series was decided (with Castro off the bench and back in the stands) by a dramatic game seven win by the Sugar Kings. The win prompted celebrations across the island. But while Cubans felt a great deal of national pride in the success of the Havana team, this did not translate into anti-American sentiment. Cuban fans readily acknowledged that the Sugar Kings were made up of both Cuban and American players, and that their success was due to contributions of all players.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Quirk, 260.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Echevarria, 342.

Autumn 1959, therefore, represented a critical moment in the history of baseball relations between the United States and Cuba. A Cuban team met an American franchise for the most prestigious minor league championship and won. Cuban fans were proud of their national team. Through his attendance, even the revolutionary leader Fidel Castro acknowledged the importance of a Havana-based baseball team playing in a US league and spoke openly about preserving the Sugar Kings. The Havana franchise was perhaps the only American institution whose presence on the island was not only tolerated, but also even welcomed by Cubans. Whereas the Castro regime may have had grounds to condemn other American industries, such as oil, sugar, and gambling, as exploiting the Cuban people, such criticisms were never leveled at the Sugar Kings. Although the Castro government took a far more radical course with regard to the United States in 1960, the athletic events of 1959 demonstrated that the Sugar Kings could have been a positive and mutually beneficial presence in Cuba even in contrast to other US influences.

Political developments in Cuba raised serious concerns in the United States and within Organized Baseball. In January 1960, barely a year after Fidel Castro succeeded in overthrowing the Batista regime, the International League held its annual meeting in Buffalo. At this meeting, owners voted to give President Shaughnessy the authority to move any team during the season at his own discretion, with Toronto and Havana the only franchises to oppose this resolution. Although the resolution applied to all IL teams, it was clear that the Sugar Kings were only team likely to be transferred. Rumors

persisted throughout the spring that the Sugar Kings would be moved to New Jersey because of the increased volatility of the Cuban political scene.⁷⁷

Instead of using baseball to improve relations with the new Cuban government, the game was seen as a way to undermine Castro's regime. At an April National Security Council (NSC) meeting, the idea of broadcasting major league games to the island was proposed. To advance US policy and to discredit the information that the Cuban government was giving its people, American news would be broadcast between innings. In the end, however, members of the NSC decided that baseball was not the best way to bring down the Cuban regime, and the idea was dropped.⁷⁸

The 1960 season began innocently enough, much the same as 1959. Castro threw out the first pitch of the Sugar Kings' home opener, and the first few months passed without incident.⁷⁹ Castro recognized that the continued existence of the team in Havana was in danger, however, and took steps to keep it in Cuba. Shortly after the season opened, he met with Maduro and assured him that whatever other measures the revolutionary government might take against American property on the island, baseball holdings were safe. Additionally, Castro offered to help underwrite debts incurred by the Sugar Kings to put them on a sounder financial footing.⁸⁰ This was an extraordinary offer – Castro was offering to open the Cuban government coffers to make sure that the Sugar Kings' books were in good shape so they could continue to participate in American

⁷⁷ Ibid., 345.

⁷⁸ "Memorandum of Discussion at the 441st Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, April 14, 1960," John P. Glennon and Ronald D Landa, eds, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-1960: Volume VI -- Cuba* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 895.

⁷⁹ Echevarria, 345.

⁸⁰ Pettavino and Pye, 37.

Organized Baseball. In this way, the new Cuban leader's condemnation of the United States was not universal. It appears that Castro had made a distinction in his mind between the Sugar Kings and other American businesses and interests in Cuba and was eager to preserve the US baseball presence.

Although insisting that it would do whatever was necessary to keep the Sugar Kings in Havana, the Cuban government declared economic warfare against American corporations. American-owned sugar plantations and oil refineries were taken over by the Cuban government.⁸¹ In early July 1960, Castro announced himself to be a Communist and stepped up the process of nationalizing American businesses. What was once seen as a desirable location for US corporations had become hostile and dangerous.

By the middle of the 1960 season, conditions had dramatically changed in Cuba. American ballplayers found that US currency was in high demand on the island. As they flew back to the United States, the Buffalo Bisons saw thick black smoke out their plane's windows. The smoke came from American oil tanks that had been exploded by the Cubans when American oil companies refused to refine Soviet crude oil.⁸² In a sense, these fires represented the final break between Cuban and the United States. In the weeks and months that followed, Castro aligned himself with the Soviet Union and the US responded by attempting to isolate the island. American ballplayers would not return to Cuba for almost forty years.

⁸¹ For a more detailed discussion of American corporate involvement in Cuba and the degradation of economic and political ties between the two nations, see Louis A. Perez Jr., *Cuba and the United States: Singular Ties of Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990).

⁸² O'Neal, 164.

Despite Castro's continued personal guarantees of player safety, IL President Shaughnessy moved the Havana Sugar Kings to Jersey City on July 13, saying, "We just want to make sure everyone is safe." The team was on the road in the United States at the time, and the move apparently came as a surprise to ownership, management, and players alike. Tony Castano, the manager, and Reinaldo Cordeiro, a coach, quit the team immediately and returned to Cuba. Napoleon Reyes took over as manager of the team and came under harsh criticism back home in Cuba for his decision.⁸³ Given the deterioration in diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba, one has to wonder about how much of a surprise the move really was. It would have been naive to expect the IL to keep the Sugar Kings in Havana given the hostility between the Castro and Eisenhower governments.

International League baseball proved to be an abject failure in Jersey City. After drawing 100,000 fans in five games during the previous season in Havana, the team finished last in attendance for the 1960 season with 47,900. The next season was barely an improvement since they ended up next to last with only 61,940. Before the 1962 season, the club was moved again – to Atlanta.⁸⁴

Cold War Politics

The decision to withdraw the Sugar Kings from Havana was part of a larger US policy toward the Castro regime, which in turn was part of a still larger Cold War

⁸³ Echevarria, 345.

⁸⁴ O'Neal, 168.

political scene.⁸⁵ The Sugar Kings were pulled out of Havana only days after President Eisenhower announced that the US would no longer import sugar from the island, effectively eliminating the sugar quota that Cuba depended on for its economic survival. Later in 1960, Major League Baseball Commissioner Ford Frick prevented American ballplayers from participating in the Cuban Winter League.⁸⁶

The Cuban Revolution and the Castro regime had become fodder for American Cold War politics during the 1960 presidential campaign. Eager to avoid being viewed as soft on Communism, then-Senator John F. Kennedy called for American assistance in building up the “non-Batista Democratic anti-Castro forces in exile, and in Cuba itself, who offer the eventual hope of overthrowing Castro.”⁸⁷ Kennedy went even further and blamed the Eisenhower Administration for “losing” Cuba to the Soviet Bloc. During a presidential debate with Vice President Richard Nixon, Kennedy stated, “I wasn’t the vice president who presided over the Communization of Cuba.”⁸⁸

Having won the White House in part on a platform of getting tough on Cuba, Kennedy could not easily take a passive stance toward political events on the island. In

⁸⁵ The degree of State Department involvement in the decision to move the Sugar Kings has been a matter of some debate. Edward Boorstein contends that Secretary of State Herter put direct pressure on Baseball Commissioner Frick to make the move. However, Boorstein’s objectivity must be questioned as he is a self-professed Marxist who left the United States shortly after the 1959 Revolution to work within the new Cuban government. His writings are filled with anti-American vitriol, so without supporting documentation, it cannot be assumed that there was in fact direct pressure from the State Department on Major League Baseball. For more on Boorstein’s argument, see Edward Boorstein, *The Economic Transformation of Cuba* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968), 28-29.

⁸⁶ Jamail, 123.

⁸⁷ Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York: The Dial Press, 1983), 45.

⁸⁸ Philip W. Bonsal, *Cuba, Castro, and the United States* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971), 171.

April 1961, Kennedy's State Department issued a pamphlet on Cuba, escalating the level of inflammatory rhetoric. It classified the actions of the Castro regime as a "betrayal" of the 1959 Revolution. What had started off as an effort to enlarge Cuban democracy had been perverted by its leadership. According to this document, the new government had destroyed relations between the United States and Cuba, and the island had been transformed into a tool of international Communism. Castro, the State Department concluded, represented the first modern totalitarian ruler in the Western Hemisphere, as witnessed by his regimes use of firing squads. The Cuban Revolution represented an assault on the whole hemisphere, and needed to be resisted by the United States. Evidence of this threat was other instances of civil disobedience in Latin America, which were clearly influenced by Cuba.⁸⁹

In effect, Kennedy's rhetoric during the 1960 campaign transformed Cuba from a serious, but primarily regional, concern into a top Cold War priority. By essentially using Cuba in much the same way as Republicans used China in 1952⁹⁰, Kennedy played to the masses and manipulated Cold War political paranoia to boost his electoral cause. The Eisenhower administration's response to this raising of the stakes helped lay the groundwork for US policy toward Cuba not only for the next administration, but up to the present day.

With the loss of the Sugar Kings in July 1960, Castro could see the handwriting on the wall and realized that the Cuban Winter League was in danger as well. Ernesto

⁸⁹ "Cuba," Department of State Pamphlet, April 3, 1961, *Documents of American Foreign Relations – 1961*, 438, 445.

⁹⁰ During the 1952 Presidential Election, General Eisenhower had effectively cast aspersions on the fitness of any Democrat to serve as president, blaming the party for "losing" China to the Communists. For a detailed discussion of this campaign tactic, see Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*.

“Che” Guevara tried to undermine the State Department’s influence over Organized Baseball by contacting American team owners directly and offering them cash in exchange for allowing their players to continue to play in Cuba during the winter. It is unclear what Castro’s goal was with this attempt. It is possible that he was trying to drive a wedge between Organized Baseball and the American government or that he simply overestimated the ability of baseball owners to violate government policies. In any case, the effort failed. On September 1, 1960, Commissioner Frick announced a total ban on American players playing in Cuba.⁹¹

The Cuban League, therefore, was in grave danger, as it found itself at a loss for television revenue and had to recruit a completely new crop of players to replace the Americans. Castro, recognizing the importance of baseball to the Cuban people, intervened and injected a fresh supply of cash to keep the league afloat. Additionally, the recruitment drive for Cuban players went better than expected, and the quality of play for the 1961 season was not measurably worse than the season before according to most accounts. If anything, Cuban fans felt more passionately about baseball than ever before. At least according to public rhetoric, by having an all-Cuban league for the first time, baseball became even more a source of national pride.⁹² Perhaps putting on a happy face to spite the United States, Cuban sports writers interviewed by the *New York Times* spoke highly of this new nationalist sentiment. They praised the loss of American players, saying that for the first time in 53 years, Cuban baseball was free of US influence. Although games were not as well attended as they had been in the past, the Cuban reporters claimed that the drop was not due to a lower-quality product on the field.

⁹¹ Echevarria, 346.

⁹² Ibid., 347-348.

Instead, they insisted that lower attendance was due to the fact that the upper and middle classes had lost property in the revolution and were unable to go to games.⁹³

But this initial success in the post-US era of Cuban baseball proved short lived. Cuban fans were accustomed to high-quality play featuring some of the best American talent. When it became clear that these days would not return, fans stopped going to the games. Owners filled the stands with school children and senior citizens in order not to lose face by playing games to an empty stadium. Very few of those in attendance were paying customers.⁹⁴ The Cuban government soon took up the cause of baseball, trying to preserve the game's place in Cuban society. Using the slogan, "Be a patriot, and go to the ball games," it attempted to help boost lagging attendance. Nothing worked. Reduction in admission prices (from the equivalent of \$1 to 60 cents) and special ladies nights did not improve the situation. Even Castro showing up to games in person did not bring back the fans.⁹⁵

Beyond falling attendance, Cuban baseball faced other difficulties following its split from the US. Baseballs, formerly imported from the United States, were in short supply. When foul balls were hit into the stands, fans were asked to return them to the field so the game could continue. As a last-ditch effort to keep Cuban professional baseball afloat, players were asked to take a 25% pay cut as a "patriotic gesture." Cuban labor unions even purchased box seats to improve the revenue stream.⁹⁶

Recognizing baseball's precarious position on the island, the Cuban government attempted to take control of the situation and turn it to their advantage. Abolishing the

⁹³ "Baseball is Dying in Castro's Cuba," *New York Times*, 11 November 1960, 2.

⁹⁴ Echevarria, 350.

⁹⁵ "Baseball is Dying in Castro's Cuba," 2

⁹⁶ "Baseball is Aided in Cuba," *New York Times*, 12 November 1960, 6.

Cuban League and professional baseball in the mid-60s, the regime declared that it was a victory, not a defeat for the island. Using Marxist rhetoric in equating the trading of players with slavery, the government declared that the end of professional ball and the creation of a new, amateur system represented “the triumph of free baseball over slave baseball.”⁹⁷ The impact of the loss of the Cuban League and professional baseball in Cuba was devastating for the players. Those who remained on the island saw a dramatic cut in their income. Most players either did not have the resources to leave Cuba for the United States and the promise of professional ball, or did not have the will to leave their families behind. For those Cubans already playing in the United States, it soon became clear that they did not have a real home to go back to.⁹⁸

Castro’s efforts to preserve baseball following the 1959 Revolution reveal the cultural importance of the game in Cuba. Having tried and failed to maintain the status quo in terms of American-style professionalism, Castro turned instead to a more communist-inspired version of the game. It is interesting to note that his first choice was apparently to continue the Cuban league with capitalist influences. Only after failing in this attempt did he resort to a condemnation of US professional baseball in socialistic terms. In this light, a missed window of opportunity for US intervention becomes more clear.

The end of professional baseball marked the start of a new athletic era in Cuba. A new amateur league was established under the name *Beisbol Revolucionario*. The league began with four teams and expanded incrementally to twelve by 1967. Fans were not initially enthusiastic for it was difficult for them to abandon their old loyalties to the

⁹⁷ Jamail, 29.

⁹⁸ Echevarria, 351.

professional Cuban League. In the 1970s, *Beisbol Revolucionario* expanded again, and teams were placed in each of Cuba's 14 provinces to play off regional rivalries.

Eventually, the new set-up became entrenched, and baseball in Cuba continues to be played under this system.⁹⁹

Organized Baseball in the United States did not forget about Cuba. In 1971, Preston Gomez, manager of the San Diego Padres wanted to take a major league all-star team to Cuba to play a series of games. He received permission from Commissioner Bowie Kuhn, but was denied the necessary visas from the State Department. Although an avid baseball fan, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger was opposed to allowing American ballplayers to travel to Cuba. Still, he directed State Department personnel to draft a memo assessing the advisability of allowing American players to go to the island. Citing the positive results from ping-pong diplomacy in China, the memo concluded that such an athletic exchange would be beneficial to both nations. Kissinger still chose to prevent any exhibition games.¹⁰⁰

The issue of travel by American ball players to Cuba was revisited in 1975. Major League Commissioner Bowie Kuhn met with the Cuban Government Sports Agency (INDER) about the possibility of an exhibition game in Havana in late March. Examining the documents, it again appears as though Kissinger was the only individual who opposed the game. Commissioner Kuhn, Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs William Rogers, and INDER Director Jorge García Bango all favored it. After it became clear that there was no chance of holding the game during the 1975 season,

⁹⁹ Jamail, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 123-124.

efforts focused on the following season. In the end, however, Kissinger could not be persuaded and these efforts were abandoned.¹⁰¹

Recognizing the government's opposition to baseball exchange with Cuba, Organized Baseball began policing itself in the late 70s. In 1977, the New York Yankees wanted to travel to Cuba. This time, the proposal never made it to the State Department as Commissioner Kuhn shot it down himself. In response to growing interest in Cuban baseball, Major League Baseball issued what became known as the Kuhn directive later that same year. In part, the statement read: "No discussion with anyone in Cuba regarding the signing of any player to a professional contract is permitted. When and if Cuban players become available, an orderly system will be created for the allocation of player talent." This directive is still in effect today.¹⁰²

Although the governments of the United States and Cuba may have been at loggerheads since 1960, the baseball fans of each nation still respect each other. Dick Case, executive director of the US Baseball Federation said, "We need to stop the Cold War with Cuba. We need to break that barrier down and we can start with baseball."¹⁰³ Examples of the good feelings toward the United States by Cuban baseball fans can be seen in two incidents. In 1977, while participating in an international baseball tournament, the US national team played a game in Cuba. As the US National Anthem played, the Cuban crowd stood in silent respect. Said one Cuban fan, "You can't raise your flag over us by force, but you can through baseball." Ten years later, American

¹⁰¹ These documents are available online at the *National Security Archive* (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/>). For documents related to Cuban baseball, see the Electronic Briefing Book under "Cuba."

¹⁰² Jamail, 125-126.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 128.

pitcher Jim Abbott, who was born with only one arm, played on the US national team. While competing against the Cuban squad, one observer commented, “Jim Abbott is so popular that if the Cuban government had any money, they would erect a statue to him.”¹⁰⁴

It is difficult to determine the condition of Cuba in 2004. Some American observers believe that Castro’s government is struggling to not only provide basic needs for the Cuban people, but for its very survival. There is a joke that is told on the island: “The three main accomplishments of the revolution are, as Castro says, education, medical treatment, and sports. The three main failures are breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”¹⁰⁵ Cuba was economically devastated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist bloc in the early 1990s. Suddenly, the Castro regime found itself in desperate need of hard currency and export markets for sugar. The island developed an increased dependence on tourism instead of trade to maintain its economy. The Cuban people felt the pinch most profoundly through increased numbers of rationed goods and higher prices for those goods that were available.¹⁰⁶

Recognizing the difficult economic situation in which he found his nation, Castro has tried to refocus the nation’s energies on something that he believed Cuba could find success in – athletics. Even as the economic system was hurting, sports were put forward as a shining beacon for the nation. Success came quickly in international competition. At the 1996 Summer Olympics, Cuba took home 31 medals, ranking the island sixth

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰⁵ Pettavino and Pye, “Sport in Cuba: Castro’s Last Stand,” Joseph L Arbena and David G. LaFrance eds, *Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 147.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

overall, behind only the United States, the Unified Team (the former Soviet Union), Germany, China, and Hungary.¹⁰⁷ Baseball in particular served the needs of the Cuban government to stir up nationalistic pride. Cuban baseball players developed the reputation for being the best amateurs in the world, compiling an impressive record in international competition in general and against the United States in particular. But the players were hurt by the economy too. The Golden Age of Cuban baseball was gone. In the late 90s, the typical Cuban baseball player made approximately \$30 a month, when an estimated \$120 was required to maintain simply a basic standard of living.¹⁰⁸

However, athletic success alone is not sufficient to satisfy the population about the success of a regime. Economic conditions have created resentment in Cuba, and much of that resentment is directed at the regime's continued funding of athletics at the expense of other needs. If current economic hardships persist in Cuba, it will soon be difficult to justify government expenditures on sports development programs. At the same time, if athletes do not receive adequate compensation, the appeal of the United States will continue to grow, particularly for baseball players. More athletes may try and defect.¹⁰⁹

(Mis)Use of Sport

Neither the United States nor Cuba has attempted to use the game of baseball as a diplomatic tool to improve relations. Both sides have used the game as a weapon – literally so in the case of the United States. In the 1960s, the Central Intelligence

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 148.

¹⁰⁸ Jamail, 6-7.

¹⁰⁹ Pettavino and Pye, "Sport in Cuba: Castro's Last Stand," 149, 154.

Agency, aware of Castro's fondness for baseball, unsuccessfully tried to assassinate him by having him play catch with an explosive ball.¹¹⁰ Cuba has used baseball as a metaphorical weapon. Castro looks at the game not as a way to open channels of communication with the United States, but as an opportunity to beat the Americans at their own game and to prove the viability of his regime. The Cuban government crowed loudly when its national team defeated American squads in international competitions such as the Olympics and the Pan-American Games.¹¹¹

To resume the level of baseball relations that existed in the mid-1950s today would be exceedingly difficult for the United States, as it would effectively destroy the trade embargo against Cuba that has existed for over forty years. Although the Cold War ended over a decade ago, powerful political forces (including the Cuban-American population in south Florida) insist that the embargo remain in place. In 1999, the Baltimore Orioles traveled to Cuba to play a series of exhibition games against the Cuban national team. Perhaps this trip has laid the groundwork for some sort of normalization of athletic relations between the two nations. Only time will tell if baseball can improve diplomatic relations.

Looking back, it appears that the United States missed an opportunity to use baseball to maintain a non-intrusive foothold in Cuba following the 1959 Revolution. In the years leading up to Batista's fall, the United States established a positive athletic presence on the island. Unlike other aspects of the relationship between the two nations, baseball was the one area where the relations were of equals. Games between American and Cuban teams were not cases of one side exploiting the other. There is no evidence to

¹¹⁰ Jamail, 9, 130.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

suggest that Cubans believed they were being taken advantage of by participating within the structure of Organized Baseball. The Cubans welcomed American baseball and baseball players into their country. They supported their team, and appreciated the talents of Americans and Cubans alike.

For their part, Americans accepted both baseball in Cuba and Cuban players in American baseball leagues. After initial hesitation about the necessary travel time to get to Havana, there is no evidence that the Sugar Kings were thought of in America as any less than equals with American clubs. There is every reason to believe that if events had happened differently, Havana might have some day become home to a major league franchise, much in the same way that both Montreal and Toronto have. Cuban players were welcomed in America. From 1947-1960, 135 Cubans played major league baseball.¹¹² Although the souring of relations between the US and Cuba hurt athletic interchange after the revolution, some Cubans continued to play in the big leagues as late as the 1970s. Perhaps the most famous Cuban player from this era was Tony Perez, a member of the great Cincinnati Reds teams (The Big Red Machine) of the late 70s.

But the question remains, if both the people of the United States and Cuba wanted baseball ties to persist after the 1959 Revolution, why did they not? The answer comes down to Cold War politics. American politicians in the late 50s and early 60s were haunted by the specter of international Communism. Before Fidel Castro declared himself to be a Communist, and even before he took any action that could be considered

¹¹² Ibid., 10.

anti-American, the US government had decided that he was a Marxist and a threat.¹¹³

Having come to such a conclusion, politicians competed against each other to prove that they could be the toughest on this danger to national security. This hard-line approach to the new Cuban regime may not have turned Castro Communist, but it certainly contributed to a hardening of antagonism between Cuba and the United States.

In this light, the Sugar Kings were a casualty of the Cold War. Although Castro recognized the team's importance to Cuba and promised that he would do whatever it took not only to keep the team in Havana, but also to protect American teams coming to Cuba to play them, Cold War politics proved to be too powerful to save it. It would have taken a brave American politician to push the International League to keep the Sugar Kings in Cuba. This baseball team could have been used by the US as a way of maintaining at least a small, unofficial presence in Cuba. By keeping open this seemingly minor communications channel between the two countries and by allowing continued athletic exchanges, it is possible that the Sugar Kings could have served as a conduit to prevent relations between the US government and the Castro regime from deteriorating as quickly and as harshly as they did.

Unfortunately, presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were not courageous with respect to Cuba. Eisenhower had long neglected the island and had put incompetent ambassadors in the persons of Earl Smith and Phillip Bonsal in charge of diplomatic relations there. This policy of not-so-benign neglect contributed greatly to the overthrow

¹¹³ Roy R. Rubottom, Jr., "Communism in the Americas," 3 February 1958, *Department of State Bulletin: 1958* (Washington: Office of Public Communication, Bureau of Public Affairs: 1958), 181-185.

of Batista in 1959.¹¹⁴ Having derided the Truman Administration for “losing” China, Eisenhower believed that he could ill afford to appear accommodating toward Castro. For Kennedy, Cuba was a domestic political battleground. By blaming the Eisenhower Administration for Castro’s triumph during the campaign, he effectively prevented himself from seeking any sort of compromise with the Maximum Leader. Additionally, Kennedy was very aware that he was widely perceived as soft by his political foes. It is clear how an effort to debunk this line of thinking played into his Cuban policy.

Laying blame on US politicians and policy makers is, of course, contingent on believing that Castro was telling the truth when he said that he would protect American player and the Sugar Kings’ assets if the team was allowed to stay. Even acknowledging his blatant anti-American actions with respect to oil refineries and sugar plantations, there is scant evidence to indicate that he was lying with respect to the Sugar Kings. Castro understood the importance of this team to the country and even enjoyed watching them play. It is hard to imagine what he could have gained from forcing them to leave. On the contrary, if the Cuban people had reason to believe he was responsible for losing the team for Cuba, his standing would have been greatly hurt.

So in the end, why is this one minor league baseball team important? The Sugar Kings are significant not only because they represent a missed opportunity for the United States to avoid making such an important regional enemy, but they show how the Cold War influenced diplomatic and political thinking. If we study the past to avoid making the same mistakes in the future, there are valuable lessons to be learned about the potential of hardball diplomacy.

¹¹⁴ See Paterson, *Contesting Castro*.

CHAPTER 2

PING-PONG POLITICS

A little more than a decade after the fall of Batista in Cuba and the end of US diplomatic relations with the island, the world was shown in dramatic fashion how sport could be used to cut through Cold War politics and improve relations between adversaries. This breakthrough, however, did not come with a nation with whom the United States enjoyed a long history of mutually beneficial athletic relations prior to the rise of Communism, as was the case in Cuba. Instead, the diplomatic value of sports was seen in China, a nation with an athletic past almost totally independent from American influences.

As we will see, although there were some Western influences on sport in China, there was never anything remotely approximating the baseball ties between the United States and Cuba. China developed its own athletic identity that did not look to the US for a model. In fact, while Castro attempted to develop his own version of American professional baseball in an effort to compensate for the loss of athletic relations with the US, China's path after the Communist takeover of the country was a rejection of Western influences on its culture – including sports.

In this light, it is important to examine why athletic diplomacy was successful with regard to Sino-American relations while it was never even attempted with respect to Cuba. But even more important in terms of American foreign policy during the Cold

War is that it was not the United States but China who recognized the potential of sports. Although in Richard Nixon, the US had a president who believed that improving relations with China was a top foreign policy priority, it was China who was the initiator and the United States who was put in the position of reacting.

Roots of Sport

Athletics in China have a long history, dating back at least to 1267 BC. That year, according to legend, Chinese military leader Huang-Ti developed a sport similar to Western soccer to promote training and teamwork of soldiers. During the Liang Dynasty (502-557AD), the Shao Lin style of boxing developed as a series of movements whose goal was to improve the health of participants.¹ China's athletic isolation began to change in 1895 when the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) arrived in China. The YMCA was a Christian organization with a primarily missionary focus. Missionaries were clear about their goal in China – to Christianize a previously untouched nation. They used athletics to help create a more positive attitude toward physical labor in the regions in which they were working in. Before the introduction of the YMCA, there was little or no physical education in China and the program was seen as a way to modernize China. Additionally, sport was used as a way of gaining a foothold in areas that would have been otherwise closed to missionaries. The Chinese

¹ Jonathan Kolatch, *Sports, Politics, and Ideology in China* (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1972), xix-xvi; Chih-Kang Wu, "The Influence of the YMCA on the Development of Physical Education in China" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1957), 59.

people opened up to Western culture through sports and were then more willing to hear about Christianity.²

The missionaries introduced Western sports such as track and field and soccer to the Chinese, as well as uniquely American sports like baseball and basketball. The first evidence of basketball being played in China is a January 11, 1896 article in the *Tientsin Bulletin*. Eleven years later, in 1907, the same publication ran a story about a baseball game, noting that since the weather was too hot for soccer, baseball was an appropriate athletic compromise.³ In 1910, the YMCA organized the country's first-ever Chinese National Athletic Meet. Held from October 18-22, the event was a great success, with athletes competing in track, soccer, and basketball. Over the years, other sports were added, with table tennis making its debut in 1948.⁴

The transition to Western sports occasionally conflicted with traditional Chinese culture. During that first National Athletic Meet, Sun Baoxin, a high jumper, missed on his first two attempts at the opening height. Noticing that Sun's traditional *queue* of hair, which was tied up on the back of his neck, was knocking off the bar, a Western event judge told him to cut it off. Encouraged to do so by other athletes, Sun went home that night, cut his hair, and returned the next day to win the event.⁵ Tensions between Western sport and traditional Chinese culture were witnessed in other ways. With the introduction of American games such as basketball, it was impractical for male athletes to wear the traditional Chinese clothes such as long, loose gowns tied at the waist with a

² Kolatch, 26, 30.

³ Wu, 89-90.

⁴ Kolatch, 8, 12, 14.

⁵ Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 42.

cord because they made running and jumping exceedingly difficult. Also during these years, the increasing influence and popularity of Western sports gave a significant boost to the anti-foot binding movement for women.⁶

The YMCA found success in China in large part because of its emphasis on developing indigenous leadership. In this way, the organization's social gospel message was widely accepted because the Chinese people saw it as a movement of, by, and for the Chinese people, rather than an imposition from outside. Historian Jun Xing believes that the YMCA can be seen as a sort of forerunner of the Chinese Communists as the Christian group primed the Chinese people to accept a message of serving the people. There were parallels in the messages of both groups in terms of promotion of rural literacy, education of women, and an end to opium use and prostitution.⁷ Although the YMCA attempted to make working conditions better for the Chinese people, Jun argues that it was not a significant force in reshaping Chinese society as a whole. Although the organization was important for those individuals it reached, it did not reach enough people to effect widespread change.⁸

Still, the athletic impact on China was significant and can be measured through the dramatic growth in the use of private sports clubs. In 1912, there were 3,786 such facilities in Shanghai. By 1916, that number had risen to 30,269. But more important than the local impact, was that the YMCA helped bring China out of its self-imposed isolation. In 1922, China joined the International Olympic Committee (IOC) for the first time in the modern (post-1896) Olympic Era and attended its first IOC meeting in 1928.

⁶ Wu, 33.

⁷ Jun Xing, *Baptized in the Fire of Revolution; The American Social Gospel and the YMCA in China: 1919-1937* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 1996), 61-63.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 123-124.

In 1932, China sent two athletes to the Los Angeles summer games and followed that up by sending 107 athletes to Berlin in 1936, participating in track, soccer, weightlifting, swimming, boxing, and cycling.⁹

In the mid-1920s, sports increasingly became a political issue in China. With the formation of the Chinese Communist Party came increasing criticism of Western influences. In 1925, Communists led the boycott of the Eight University Meet because two of the participating schools were Christian missionary institutions. Additionally, Communists objected to the Western “medals-and-trophyism” type of competitions that had developed in China and raised questions about special privileges afforded to athletes. The Communists claimed to believe in opening up athletics so that everyone could participate in sports.¹⁰ This would become a recurring theme for Chinese Communists.

Following the formation of the nationalist Nanking government in 1928, physical education became a national priority. The new government shifted the responsibility for physical education from the private sector and made it a part of the school curriculum. In April 1929, the National Physical Education Law took effect, mandating that all children were to receive physical education with the goal being to bring about an “orderly development” and an ability to endure physical labor. Every city and town was directed to construct its own sports facilities.¹¹

By 1937, there was a widespread rejection of the social gospel among the Chinese people as preached by YMCA missionaries and an increasing popular acceptance of revolutionary communism as being better suited to the needs of China. Christianity and

⁹ Kolatch, 21.

¹⁰ Brownell, 48.

¹¹ Kolatch, 31-35.

Communism became competing ideologies, not the complementary forces of a decade before. Historian Jun Xing asserts that this changing attitude did not indicate that the Chinese people had become anti-foreign, but rather that the YMCA was perceived as not doing enough for China. The rise of Communism promised to immediately address Chinese needs while the YMCA only held out Christian gradualism.¹² China was headed toward a break with the West.

By the 1940s, China had undergone a tremendous athletic evolution. Under the influence and direction of the YMCA, Western sport took hold and flourished, albeit in a limited geographic way.¹³ China entered the international sporting community through the Olympics, effectively ending its athletic isolation. But along with this cultural modernization came the seeds of an anti-Western national policy. The YMCA paved the way for Chinese Communists who in turn promised the Chinese people a more immediate and internally developed solution to hardships facing the country.

After the Communist takeover of China in 1949, the new government, led by Mao Tse Tung, supported athletics as an integral part of the nation's culture. Sports were an important part of working class life, and the government encouraged physical activity of the people through organized mass participation in sports. According to Mao, the ultimate goal was to, "Promote physical culture and build up the people's health."¹⁴

The Chinese Communists wanted to create a "mass physical culture," with access to athletics for all. In this way, they hoped to inspire a collective spirit among the people that was essential for the development of socialism. But there was another, more

¹² Xing, 167-169.

¹³ Western sport was only popular in the regions where the YMCA had a strong presence.

¹⁴ *Sports in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973), foreword.

practical purpose for the role of sport in Mao's government: by encouraging physical health and strength of the people, athletics became part of China's national defense. This emphasis can be seen in the way in which athletics such as track and field and soccer were depicted by the Communists – as ways to make China strong and to develop collective attitude that would make the nation safe from outside threats. Significantly, the only sport that was not put forward in this combative manner was table tennis. It was the most publicized game in Mainland China, but was not regarded as being part of China's national security.¹⁵ Table tennis was viewed exclusively as a recreational activity, not as a sport of physical strength. The distinction between the majority of other sports and table tennis is important for diplomatic relations.

In the early years of Chinese Communist rule, attitudes toward sporting competitions changed little. Athletic successes, particularly on the international stage, were seen by the Communist regime as bringing glory to China. Mao was quick to point to world records held by Chinese athletes in such sports as track, swimming and weightlifting.¹⁶ In the years preceding the Cultural Revolution, this attitude began to change. The Chinese Communists came to believe that an emphasis on winning over mass participation reflected Western capitalist thinking and was inappropriate in true socialism. Therefore, competitive spirit was derided for being a “medals-and-trophyism” attitude, and anyone who advocated winning was denounced.¹⁷ Instead, the Chinese

¹⁵ Kolatch, 94, 135.

¹⁶ *Sports in China*, foreword.

¹⁷ Brownell, 302.

government advocated a “Friendship first, competition second” mindset that they believed would place their athletes on the moral high ground with respect to the West.¹⁸

Sport was not the only cultural area in which the Communist regime attempted to remake China in a socialist image. In the 1950s and 60s, Mao worked to transform Chinese art and music to better fit his concept of a Communist society. The Cultural Revolution was a direct attack on Western ideas and values and was a distinct step back into isolation for China. In the early 1950s, a large number of wealthy Chinese fled Mainland China for Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United States out of fear of the Communist regime. Still, a number of artists and musicians remained in their homeland, believing that there would be an expansion of employment opportunities for them under the new government. The Soviet Union sent musical stars and touring conservatories throughout the country to perform. They played Western classical music, mostly Eastern European, overcoming Chinese government fears that such music was dangerous. In this way, the Soviet Union was able to establish the West as a legitimate source of culture, even in a Communist nation, lending credibility to Chinese musicians and artists.¹⁹

The year 1955 was the beginning of a change in Party attitudes toward art. The government encouraged criticism of Western tastes. For example, Johann Strauss’s “Wine, Women, and Song” was deemed inappropriate for a socialist society as it “rendered their listeners passive, devoid of political will.” To correct the mindset of

¹⁸ *Sports in China*, foreword.

¹⁹ Richard Curt Kraus, *Pianos and Politics in China: Middle Class Ambitions and the Struggle Over Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 76, 79-80.

musicians, performers and composers were ordered to help with collective agricultural efforts by singing folk songs to workers.²⁰

The Chinese Great Leap Forward was seen by Moscow as a repudiation of Soviet economic policies. In response, Nikita Khrushchev pulled all Soviet technical advisors out of China in 1960. This included musical experts stationed in Chinese conservatories. As a result, the early 1960s were a time of increasing criticism of Western music, with Beethoven's symphonies as the main target. While the Communist government conceded that these pieces would not necessarily restore bourgeois power, it argued that they might distract the middle class from problems facing workers and peasants. Instead of these "dangerous" classics, the singing of revolutionary mass songs such as "We are Marching on a Great Road," "People's Communes are Good," and "Revolutionaries are Always Youthful" was encouraged instead.²¹

Around this time, Mao upped the ante of the Cultural Revolution and directed attacks against artists and musicians. In a June 1964 speech, Mao said,

In the past fifteen years, the literary and art circles for the most part ... had not carried out the policies of the Party and had acted as high and mighty bureaucrats ... In recent years they have even slid to the verge of revisionism. If serious steps were not taken to remold them, they were bound at some future date to become groups like the Hungarian Petofi Club.²²

Dubbed the Socialist Education Movement, its goal was to fight against the bureaucratization of Chinese politics and reverse socio-economic trends that Mao believed were revisionist and might lead to new forms of capitalism. Two years later, Mao went

²⁰ Ibid., 83-84.

²¹ Ibid., 110-113.

²² The Hungarian Petofi Club was the group that attempted to bring about a revolt against the Hungarian government in 1956. Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 151.

further and called on students to denounce teachers and professors who maintained bourgeois ideas. Deemed the campaign against the Four Olds (old ideas, old culture, old habits, old customs), units of students called the Red Guards marched through the country exchanging revolutionary ideas and searching out anti-Communist sentiment.²³

These were difficult times for many in China. The zealous Red Guards attacked anything even remotely or tenuously Western. Even clothing was a target for revolutionary criticism. Tapered pants, pointed shoes, elastic shoelaces, jeans, and white collars were dubbed “Hong Kong clothes” and subjected the wearer to a lecture on proper Cultural Revolution fashion. If a man had long hair, he was likely to have it forcibly cut as part of the short hair campaign.²⁴

Artists were in no better situation. Traditional art was totally forbidden. There could be no landscapes, birds, flowers, or paintings with impressionist influences. Instead, art was to be used for political purposes only, such as to glorify Mao as a deity.²⁵ Parallels were often made between the Chinese leader and Vladimir Lenin. Mao was often painted into scenes strikingly similar to settings of famous paintings of the Soviet revolutionary.²⁶ Even artists who appeared to display the proper revolutionary thinking might still be condemned for pre-1949 Western ties. A visit to the United States under a State Department exchange program led one artist to be accused of being a “cultural

²³ Ellen Johnston Laing, *The Winking Owl: Art in the People's Republic of China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 48, 59.

²⁴ White, Lynn T, III, *Policies of Chaos: The Organizational Causes of Violence in China's Cultural Revolution* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 281.

²⁵ Sullivan, 152.

²⁶ Laing, 66.

secret agent for the Sino-American Cooperation Bureau.” Some who had studied in Europe in their younger years were declared “ghosts and monsters.”²⁷

Efforts to reeducate artists and musicians intensified in the mid-60s. By September 1965, artists were required to spend half their time with workers and soldiers, not to gather new material for their work, but as a way to remake them in the revolutionary image. Harsh punishments befell those who did not fall into line. The lightest of these penalties was confinement to a cattle pen for sufficient time to wash out their minds and make a written confession. Often, non-compliant artists forcibly became factory or farm laborers on collectives.²⁸

The Cultural Revolution was a family affair for Chairman Mao. In November 1964, he put his wife Jiang Qing in charge of the reform of Chinese music. Jiang believed that Western music was politically unhealthy and told musicians, “Capitalism’s music is headed for destruction, you do not want to die along with the foreigners.” But traditional Chinese folk songs were not much better in her mind, as some had vulgar lyrics.²⁹ Jiang turned much of her crusade against Western music into a personal vendetta, seeking revenge against her rivals in the theater world. Her most famous victim was Sun Wizi, daughter of Zhou Enlai. Sun had done better than Jiang at the Lu Xun Academy and for that she was tortured and killed.³⁰

One of the dominant personalities of the Cultural Revolution was the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. One of Mao’s close advisors, Zhou served a dual purpose during the Cultural Revolution – that of both a moderating and driving force. The Premier’s

²⁷ Laing, 63-64.

²⁸ Sullivan, 151-153.

²⁹ Kraus, 135-136.

³⁰ Sullivan, 154.

moderation served to gain support for Mao's effort to change Chinese society. Said Han Suyn, a middle-of-the-road intellectual, "Obviously, if Zhou was for it [the Cultural Revolution], it must be all right."³¹ Zhou's leadership was first shown with the Red Guards. After being given direction from Mao to critique the path of communism in China, millions of young people answered the call and spread out across the nation. These zealots had to be cared for, had to have food, housing, and other necessities provided for them. That job fell to Zhou.³² In providing this care, the energy of the Cultural Revolution was sustained.

The violence of the Red Guards alarmed the party leadership. Although Zhou had hoped that the students would exhaust themselves, it was clear that unless someone stepped in, violence would spiral out of control. Once again, the government looked to Zhou.³³ He spoke to Red Guard members at mass meetings, pleading with them not to be indiscriminant in their efforts. It was imperative, Zhou told them, to distinguish between good and bad individuals – not to fight against those cooperating with the regime. Criticism of the bourgeoisie was appropriate, but destroying their property and taking their money from banks was going too far.³⁴

Zhou often tried to save colleagues from the wrath of the Red Guards. Sometimes, he would denounce the target of the Guards himself in order to get on the board that would pass ultimate judgment. Then, from his position on the board, he would steer the decision away from condemnation. Other times, Zhou got potential targets

³¹ Dick Wilson, *Chou: The Story of Zhou Enlai, 1898-1976* (London: Hutchinson & Company, 1984), 240-242.

³² Han Suyin, *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China, 1898-1976* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 327.

³³ *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁴ Wilson, 243.

reassigned overseas, away from the Red Guards, or even hid them in his own house until they were safe. At one point, the Guards targeted Soong Chinglin, widow of Sun Yatsen, and tried to force her to cut her long hair. Zhou intervened directly, lecturing Red Guard leaders on the importance of Sun Yatsen and later presided over a 20,000 person rally for Sun.³⁵ Though Zhou was able to save others, he was unable to protect his own daughter from the Cultural Revolution.

Between 1966 and 1967, Zhou held over one hundred meetings with Red Guard members. While he held firm to the Communist line, his statements to them had a twist that was meant to chip away at theories that led to unrestrained violence. Said one witness to the Cultural Revolution, “Zhou Enlai led us out of hell. He fought the demons, one by one.”³⁶ This attempted moderation, however, put Zhou firmly within the sights of the Guards. But as the students attempted to bring him down, the Chinese premier fought back. Attacking the Red Guard for faulty class-consciousness, Zhou said, “I also made mistakes during the Fourth Plenum of the Sixth Congress, yet Chiang Kai-Shek had orders for my arrest. How can you say that I am unrevolutionary?”³⁷ With that, Zhou was able to escape the Red Guard’s violence and lived on to strongly influence Chinese foreign policy for the next decade.

The Cultural Revolution, in a sense, was a burst of energy whereby the Communist regime was able to lash out against a variety of targets. It was opposed to things ancient because they were feudal, things Western because they were bourgeois,

³⁵ Suyin, 334.

³⁶ Ibid., 336-337.

³⁷ Wilson, 245.

and things Soviet because they were revisionist.³⁸ The end result of the Cultural Revolution, then, was a reestablishment of a cultural isolation that had not existed to this extent in over six decades. Few in the West thought there was an opportunity to reestablish diplomatic relations with China in any sort of productive way. Most believed that China would keep itself isolated from the West for the foreseeable future.

Diplomacy

This was the China that faced the United States and President Nixon in the late 1960s and early 1970s – a Communist nation that had only recently completed a chaotic process of cultural change that left it isolated not only from the West, but estranged from the Soviet Union. Relations between the United States and China were at a low point, with the US enforcing harsh trade restrictions, having severed all diplomatic ties, and maintaining a defense alliance with nationalist forces on Taiwan. Prospects of an improved atmosphere between the two nations appeared bleak at best.

Richard Nixon, however, was one American politician who believed strongly that the United States had to work toward reestablishing a diplomatic relationship with China. Nixon came to this conclusion long before winning the White House in 1968. During the 1952 presidential campaign, when then-Senator Nixon was running as part of Dwight Eisenhower's presidential ticket, Nixon attacked Secretary of State Dean Acheson's policies toward communism, blaming him for the loss of China. Adlai Stevenson, the Democratic presidential nominee, was, according to Nixon, a graduate of Acheson's

³⁸ Kraus, 139.

“Cowardly College of Communist Containment.”³⁹ The next year, as vice president, Nixon made a trip to Asia and became convinced of the need to confront Communism directly in the region to show that the West was not afraid of China and to undercut Communist propaganda. Policies of containment, he concluded, simply would not work.⁴⁰

While preparing to run for president in 1968, Nixon published an article in *Foreign Affairs*, further detailing what he believed to be the proper US policy toward China. In that piece, Nixon wrote that China represented an immediate threat to Asia and that the United States had to come to grips with that reality. In the short term, the best policy was one of restraining China, with the long-range goal of bringing the Asian power into the family of nations. The West could not afford to leave China isolated as its population represented such a large percentage of the world’s people and that it would undoubtedly have nuclear weapons someday.⁴¹ Nixon believed that the only way to achieve success in Asia was by maintaining a policy of “firm restraint, not reward” with China. In that way, the Chinese would be convinced that obeying international rules was in their interest. The West, in turn, would be able to pull China back into the world community as a progressing nation, not a center of international Communist revolution.⁴²

Around this same time, Nixon’s future chief foreign policy advisor arrived independently at a similar conclusion with regard to US policy toward China. In a speech

³⁹ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴¹ Richard Nixon, “Asia After Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (October 1967), 17 in Louis J Smith and David H. Herschler, eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976; Volume I: Foundations of Foreign Policy, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2003), 113-125.

⁴² Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*, 285.

ghost written for Nelson Rockefeller in May 1968, Henry Kissinger wrote, “In a subtle triangle with Communist China and the Soviet Union, we can ultimately improve our relations with each – as we test the will for peace of both.” The US, Kissinger believed, shared a common concern with China – the threat posed by the Soviet Union. In developing a strategic relationship with China, therefore, the United States could realize great diplomatic gains.⁴³

After taking office in January 1969, Nixon remained convinced of the need to improve US relations with China, albeit at a deliberate pace; but he was hesitant to make dramatic improvements in terms of diplomatic recognition, trade, or support for United Nations membership.⁴⁴ During a March 1969 meeting with French President Charles de Gaulle, Nixon stated in no uncertain terms that there would be no change in the United States’ China policy in the short run because of the potential impact such a change would have on the rest of Asia. However, he encouraged France to maintain relations with China, not as a weapon against the Soviet Union, but as a way to begin to draw China out of isolation.⁴⁵

Even with this caution, conflict developed in the White House over the formation of a new China policy. Kissinger, in particular, advocated a slower approach and was slow to support overly dramatic steps. When informed by one of Nixon’s aides about the president’s goal of visiting China before the end of his second term, Kissinger responded,

⁴³ Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 334.

⁴⁴ Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 55.

⁴⁵ Smith and Herschler, “RN meeting with President de Gaulle, March 1, 1969” (Document 14), 64-65.

“Fat chance.”⁴⁶ On another occasion, when asked his opinion on Nixon’s China policy, Kissinger replied, “Our leader has taken leave of reality.”⁴⁷ Opposing Kissinger and pushing for more overtures to China was Secretary of State William Rogers. Rogers believed that China was too isolated from the world community and that the US needed to open communication.

Kissinger eventually came around to a more activist point of view on China, due in part to a memorandum by Undersecretary of State Elliot Richardson, outlining the benefits of lifting trade restrictions. Richardson listed several ways of easing trade barriers that would result in benefits for US diplomacy without helping China, including allowing American tourists to buy Chinese-made goods and permitting US companies to sell oil to ships traveling to China. These steps, the memo contended, would show the world that the US wanted to improve Sino-American relations and would let the Soviets know that they could not take the United States for granted. The memo concluded:

There is no question that our taking the proposed steps would arouse Soviet curiosity if not concern. The Russians would be reminded that they cannot take us for granted in respect to our relations with China and that we too have options in this case. It would point out to them that better relations with the US are not only in Russian long-term interests but are also a two-way street. And the Russians might thereby be encouraged to show a great willingness to be helpful on some of the more vexing problems between us.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Isaacson, 336.

⁴⁷ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 19.

⁴⁸ Smith and Herschler, “Memo from the Undersecretary of State to the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs, June 21, 1969” (Document 300), 786-787.

Five days later, Nixon notified the secretaries of treasury and commerce that he had agreed to Richardson and Kissinger's recommendations and would ease trade restrictions on China.⁴⁹

For nearly six months, however, these trade measures were not publicly announced. In December 1969, Secretary Rogers wrote a memo to Nixon telling him that the time was ripe for a public announcement. The Soviet Union and China were engaged in talks, and although the talks were not going well, there was still a chance that there could be a diplomatic breakthrough. An announcement by the US about the trade restrictions, Rogers wrote, would confuse the Soviets about the state of Sino-American relations. "Such an effect would also serve our long-term interest of forestalling an eventual more fundamental rapprochement between the USSR and China."⁵⁰

In conversations with Nixon, Kissinger reiterated Rogers' contentions. If Sino-Soviet relations continued to deteriorate, the Soviet Union would likely invade China. For Kissinger, China was a better alternative than Russia, in that the Asian power was less likely to stumble into a war. He believed that its leaders were smart and sophisticated, and not motivated by a drive for a war of acquisition.⁵¹

As was anticipated by Rogers, Nixon's announcement of the lifting of Chinese trade restrictions was not without international backlash. Taiwan, long concerned with the threat of Chinese invasion, was understandably nervous over the possibility of close

⁴⁹ Ibid., "National Security Memorandum 17, June 26, 1969" (Document 302), 789.

⁵⁰ "Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, December 2, 1969" (Document 308), in Bruce F. Duncombe, ed., *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976; Volume IV: Foreign Assistance, International Development, Trade policies, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 2002), 800.

⁵¹ Reeves, 169.

Sino-American ties. In a March 1970 letter to Chiang Kai-shek, Nixon attempted to address Taiwanese fears. Recognizing Chiang's distrust of China, Nixon wrote that he needed to see if a possibility existed to reduce the risk of conflict between the United States and China. Improved relations, he maintained, would establish understanding, which would in turn lead to peace and stability. Nixon concluded reassuringly that there would be no change in the US policy of defense of Taiwan.⁵²

In the months following the trade announcement, Nixon used other nations to gauge the impact of US actions on the Chinese government. In October 1970, the President met with Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu. Ceausescu informed Nixon that he had met with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai who told him that China wanted good relations with the US. Nixon, however, was hesitant to go too far toward China for fear that such a move would upset Russia. He told Ceausescu that the US wanted good relations with both the Soviet Union and China, and did not aim to play one off against the other. Nixon welcomed the Romanian leader's offer to be a go-between and asked him to reassure Russia that America's intentions were peaceful and not directed against the USSR.⁵³

Satisfied that the initial lifting of trade restrictions had gone well, the Chairman of the National Security Council Undersecretaries Committee, John N. Irwin, recommended further steps to show China that the US was serious. Although there was no expectation that there would be a dramatic increase in either travel or trade, Irwin proposed that travel, trade, export-import, currency control, and Chinese cargo entry restrictions be

⁵² Duncombe, "Letter from RN to President Chiang Kai-Shek, March 27, 1970" (Document 63).

⁵³ Smith and Herschler, "RN Meeting with Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu in Washington, DC, October 26, 1970" (Document 79), 283-284.

completely lifted. These measures, he wrote, would be important symbolically as they would show that the US was serious about improving relations.⁵⁴

On March 15, 1971, Nixon implemented some of Irwin's recommendations. That day, the State Department announced that travel restrictions to China were lifted. No longer would US citizens need special passport stamps to visit China. In a press release, Nixon said that these measures were necessary to improve communications between China and America. Underscoring the fact that China was now in a new category was that travel bans on Cuba, North Vietnam, and North Korea were explicitly mentioned as remaining in place.⁵⁵ Also noteworthy in the announcement of these new policies was that State Department press officer Charles Bray referred to China not as "Communist" or "Mainland" China, but as the "People's Republic of China," the name preferred by Mao's government.⁵⁶

Later that month, the US government got a sign that its overtures toward China were having their desired effect. While receiving a former Japanese foreign minister, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai said that a "sudden dramatic improvement is possible" in relations with the United States. Zhou also noted favorably the US government's use of China's official name. The State Department report summarizing this meeting also noted

⁵⁴ Duncombe, "Memorandum from the Chairman of the National Security Council Undersecretaries Committee (Irwin) to President Nixon, February 23, 1971" (Document 322), 832-836.

⁵⁵ "Last Restrictions on Travel to China Lifted, March 15, 1971," in Roderick MacFarquhar, ed., *Sino-American Relations, 1949-71* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 250.

⁵⁶ "Department Lists Steps Taken on Contacts with Mainland China – March 15, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (April 12, 1971), 510.

that the Chinese would be sending a team to the World Table Tennis Championships in Japan, but dismissed the gesture, thinking it was not significant.⁵⁷

The first two years of the Nixon Administration were remarkable for what was accomplished with respect to China. In a brief period of time, Nixon, Kissinger, and Rogers were able to use traditional diplomatic measures (easing economic, trade, and travel restrictions) to lay the groundwork for reestablishing productive diplomatic ties between the US and China. Furthermore, they had the added benefit of driving a wedge between China and the Soviet Union, reducing the risk of the two Communist nations aligning against the US, at the same time restraining the USSR from taking aggressive military action against China. All of the US overtures toward China came in standard diplomatic areas – through the lifting or easing of trade and travel restrictions. There exists no evidence that the Nixon Administration ever considered more unconventional means to reach out to China. What was to come next, however, was a response from China to US overtures that came from a totally unexpected venue.

By the late 1960s, the driving force of Chinese foreign policy was Zhou Enlai. Zhou had long taken a realistic view toward international affairs, saying in 1949, “With respect to foreign relations, we uphold China’s national independence and the principles of independence and self-reliance.” The premier wanted a foreign policy grounded in reality, not ideology, one that recognized the changing relations of nations to each other. Zhou drove China to play an important role in international power politics, to negotiate among other nations for the best possible outcome for China. In order to do that, China had to free itself from all forms of outside exploitation and domination. Zhou believed in

⁵⁷ Kissinger, 708-709.

creating alliances based on a combination of domestic and international needs, and not simply a shared ideology.⁵⁸ This line of thinking called into question China's relationship with the Soviet Union.

The premier was convinced that national security for China was dependant on flexibility, which was impossible so long as China was anchored to Russia. If China were too closely tied with another superpower, the nation would be dominated and overshadowed.⁵⁹ In 1968, it was apparent that the United States was softening its China policy. In August of that year, Zhou spoke out publicly to denounce the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia as "the abominable crimes of the USSR against the Czech people ..."⁶⁰ Zhou worked through unofficial channels (journalists and professional visitors to China) to soften China's image and make it clear that he was willing to reopen talks with the US.⁶¹ During the summer of 1970, Zhou invited *Life* reporter Edgar Snow to stand next to Chairman Mao during a rally. By allowing an American reporter such intimate access to the Chinese leader, Zhou was sending a sign to the US that China too had softened its foreign policy.⁶²

Still, there were divisions within the Chinese government, as some questioned Zhou's desire to move China closer to the US at the expense of its ties to Russia. General Lin Biao in particular emerged as Zhou's rival on this issue.⁶³ But in the end, what Zhou wanted was not close ties with either the US or Russia. Instead, he wanted some relations

⁵⁸ Kuo-kang Shao, *Zhou Enlai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 259-261.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁶⁰ Suyin, 369.

⁶¹ Wilson, 274.

⁶² Suyin, 374.

⁶³ Wilson, 276.

with each, but a distinct separation from both. Only by walking this fine line, Zhou believed, could China fully realize its own power and independence within the Communist bloc, within Asia, and on the world stage.⁶⁴

This was the internal thinking of the Chinese regime leading up to the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships. With Zhou Enlai primarily directing Chinese foreign policy, the Asian power was eager to step out of the Soviet Union's shadow and reach out to the United States. Events and opportunities typically thought to be unrelated to diplomacy conspired to provide China with a chance to realize this goal.

Ping-Pong?

For many in the United States, table tennis seemed a strange game for high-level international competition. Known primarily by its trade name, ping-pong, in the US, the sport was invented in England in the early 20th century. By the 1920s, it had spread internationally and in 1926, the International Table Tennis Federation was formed, with England, Sweden, Hungary, India, Denmark, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Wales as its founding members. The first world championships were held the following year in London with central European nations dominant.⁶⁵

In the early 1930s, table tennis spread to Asia and became an extremely popular sport, particularly in China. Reportedly, every Lenin Club that was established by the Chinese Communists had a ping-pong table in it, creating a connection between the game and Communism.⁶⁶ Starting in 1953, Asia emerged as the dominant region for

⁶⁴ Shao, 156, 175-176.

⁶⁵ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed., "table tennis."

⁶⁶ Kolatch, 82-83.

international table tennis competition, with China and Japan producing great players. But with the onset of the Cultural Revolution, China withdrew from international competition. The 1971 World Table Tennis Championships became internationally significant, therefore, when China announced that it would participate in them for the first time in many years.⁶⁷

Prior to the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese had been a regular participant in international table tennis competitions. They sent both men's and women's teams and did very well. However, the nation did not send a team to the 1967 event, heeding Mao's directive to the Chinese people to "concern yourselves with the affairs of state and carry the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution to the very end."⁶⁸ From 1959-1965, Chinese players had been the best in the world. However, as news of the horrors of the Cultural Revolution spread to the outside world, many in the table tennis community feared that China's best players had been killed. These fears proved groundless, however, when in November 1970 Chuang Tse-tung, a former three-time world champion, and Li Fu-jung showed up at the Scandinavian Open.⁶⁹

Even before China's self-imposed exile from international athletics, it was rare that China and the US faced off across a ping-pong table. In fact, the only previous time the two nations had faced each other was during the 23rd World Table Tennis Championships held in 1956.⁷⁰ Because most Americans thought of ping-pong mainly as a parlor or basement game, it was difficult for them to fully grasp the passion Chinese

⁶⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

⁶⁸ Kolatch, 169-170.

⁶⁹ Dick Mills, "They Still Swing a Mean Paddle," *Sports Illustrated* (12 April 1971), 32.

⁷⁰ Kolatch, 169-170.

had for the sport. In writing about the World Championships, several American media outlets drew parallels between table tennis and baseball or football to explain the popularity of the game in China. Additionally, some American writers speculated that table tennis was so popular in China because it seemed made for the Asian physique.⁷¹

Requiring little space and only simple equipment, the sport seems suited to the wiry, fine-boned Asian build, and persons of Asian descent are on the teams from several non-Asian countries, including the United States, Canada, and Australia.⁷²

By 1971, Mao's government had successfully tied table tennis to Communist teachings and ideology. Using Chinese victories in international competition to the advantage of the Communist regime, Mao wrote, "The success of the Chinese at the sport embodies spiritual, psychological, and physical commitments." Often, the Chinese team would be seen reciting Mao quotes before playing and their home crowd would chant sayings of the leader during matches.⁷³ But as noted earlier, there remained a distinction between table tennis and other sports. Whereas sports such as weightlifting and track were held up as demonstrations of the physical and military strength of the Chinese people and their ability to protect their nation, table tennis was seen almost exclusively as being a symbol of the triumph of Communist ideology. During the 1971 World Championships, one American player noticed that a Chinese player who was losing a match looked to the sidelines where his coach was holding up a copy of the Little Red

⁷¹ Neil Amdur, "Table Tennis, In China, Is Not Just A Sport," *New York Times*, 10 April 1971, 5.

⁷² Takashi Oka, "World Table Tennis Opens, With China Again Seeking Title," *New York Times*, 29 March 1971, 5.

⁷³ Amdur, 5.

Book. The coach then held the book to his own heart, and the Chinese player went on to win the next four points and the match.⁷⁴

Athletically, there were few surprises at the World Championships. Asian nations dominated the competition, with the Chinese and the Japanese winning virtually every title up for grabs. What was unusual, however, was the behavior of the Chinese team. They went out of their way to be friendly to the other competitors, with the exception of the Cambodian and South Vietnamese squads, whose countries China did not recognize.⁷⁵ The American players, in particular, were impressed with the Chinese team's attitude toward them, and being in awe of the Chinese players' abilities, were flattered that they would reach out to the US team.⁷⁶

This behavior, however, appears typical of the Chinese. In international table tennis competitions, like the World Championships, the Chinese typically took a "friendship first, competition second" approach.⁷⁷ In an interview at the World Championships, Lin Hui-ching, the vice-captain of the women's team, outlined the Chinese thinking going into the competition:

We are at the championships to promote friendship among the sportsmen and people of various countries. We place friendship above competition. We believe that our wish will certainly come true through the tournament and what we learn from players will be of value.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Judy Bockenski, "Ping Pong Diplomat," *Seventeen* 30 (October, 1971), 174.

⁷⁵ Takashi Oka, "15 Invited to Peking," *New York Times*, 8 April 1971, 1.

⁷⁶ "Interview with Tim Boggan – 17/1/97," *The National Security Archive*, Cold War Interviews; Episode 15 – China (<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/coldwar/interviews/episode-15/boggan1.html>).

⁷⁷ Brownell, 303.

⁷⁸ "31st World Table Tennis Championships," *Peking Review* 15 (9 April 1971),

This comment revealed the unique place of table tennis within the Chinese athletic culture: table tennis was not seen as an aggressive sport, but rather as a tool to increase understanding between peoples instead of vanquishing an opponent to prove the superiority of Communism.

What happened next was a surprise to the entire world. On April 5, the Chinese invited the American team, along with several other teams, to visit Mainland China. In issuing the invitation, Sung Chung, secretary of the Chinese delegation, said, "We have extended the invitation for the sake of promoting friendship between the peoples of China and the United States."⁷⁹ In addition to the players, three visas were issued to American newsmen to cover the trip, breaking a long-standing policy of barring US media from China.⁸⁰ This was the first invitation to visit mainland China by any sort of official American delegation since before the Communist takeover of the country.

To this day, it remains unclear what precisely brought about this invitation. Some have attributed the gesture to a female American team player who was traveling with the Canadian team. When the Canadians were invited to come to China, she asked if she could come along as well.⁸¹ Others credit Glenn Cowan, the American team's resident hippie, who had "wrangled" a ride with the Chinese team to an outing at Pearl Farms on the Mei Peninsula on April 4. The next day, Cowan exchanged gifts with Chinese star player Chuang Tse-tung. After these exchanges, an invitation was proffered.⁸²

⁷⁹ Oka, "15 Invited to Peking," 16.

⁸⁰ Ian Stewart, "3 Newsmen Enter Red China for Week's Visit," *New York Times*, 11 April 1971, 1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Kissinger, 709.

Six months after the original invitation, Zhou told a group of visiting Americans that Chairman Mao himself had made the decision to extend the invitation despite the Chinese Foreign Ministry opposing the idea.⁸³ Regardless, the American team was stunned, but overjoyed with the opportunity. Team members voted quickly and unanimously to go on the historic trip.⁸⁴

In retrospect, there were signs leading up to April 5 that the Chinese were willing, if not eager, to use sports for goals not traditionally associated with athletics. Less than a year before, China withdrew from the Lawn Tennis World Association because of that organization's decision to allow Taiwan to be a member.⁸⁵ On the eve of the World Table Tennis Championships, China made it clear that their participation in the tourney was contingent on the exclusion of the Taiwanese. The international table tennis community went along with the Chinese demands. The president of the Asian Table Tennis Federation agreed to keep the nationalist Chinese out of the organization and Roy Evans, an American and president of the International Table Tennis Federation, barred Taiwan from the World Championships because, "The [Taiwanese] applications have not been received in the proper form."⁸⁶

The Chinese invitation still caught the American government off guard. Nixon wrote, "I was as surprised as I was pleased by this news. I had never expected that the China initiative would come to fruition in the form of a ping-pong team. We

⁸³ Julian Schuman, "Chou Tells Americans Mao Made Decision to Invite US Table Tennis Team," *New York Times* (7 October 1971), 4.

⁸⁴ George Brathwaite, "My China Visit as a Ping Pong Diplomat," *Ebony* 27 (November 1971), 85.

⁸⁵ "The New US Policy of Peking," *China News Analysis* 840 (7 May 1971), 1.

⁸⁶ Mills, 32.

immediately approved the acceptance of the invitation.”⁸⁷ The State department in an April 7 release echoed Nixon’s pleasure: “Such an invitation would never be issued casually or without government approval. There can be no question that this is meant to indicate at least a slight relaxation of their attitude toward the United States.”⁸⁸

President Nixon received wide accolades for the diplomatic breakthrough achieved through sports. In an April 10 *New York Times* editorial, the invitation by the Chinese was described as a direct response to the Administration’s “diplomacy of smiles.” If ping-pong players were allowed into China, the paper asserted, then other Americans could not be far behind.⁸⁹ Later that month, *Time* magazine similarly credited Nixon for having the foresight to lift trade sanctions, which in turn led to improved relations with China.⁹⁰ Clearly, the American media saw the table tennis invitation as signaling a start of something more significant than a mere athletic exchange – there was an expectation that an improvement in diplomatic relations between the US and China would follow.

Although they may have been unlikely diplomats, the American table tennis team was fully aware of the significance of their trip to China. Team captain Jack Howard said that the invitation represented a “whole new start for diplomacy between the United States and China.”⁹¹ Graham Steenhoven, the president of the US Table Tennis Association, said that, “Our group feels our responsibility. Everyone is conscious of

⁸⁷ Nixon, 548.

⁸⁸ Terrence Smith, “Washington Pleased,” *New York Times*, 8 April 1971, 16.

⁸⁹ “Ping Pong Diplomacy,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1971, 22.

⁹⁰ “The Ping Heard Round the World,” *Time* 97 (26 April 1971), 25.

⁹¹ Takeshi Oka, “Table Tennis Captain,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1971, 4.

it.”⁹² Even if this personal understanding of the trip was not enough, the point was driven home by the US State Department. Officials visited the team prior to their leaving Japan for China and gave them guidelines about how to act. Players were told to avoid using the word “Chinaman.” Perhaps remembering the controversy following the display of black power signals by two African-American sprinters on the medal stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, the State Department advised players to stay away from displaying clenched fists or peace signs.⁹³

For the most part, the Americans’ trip to China was a love-fest. The Chinese team played a series of matches with its guests. Although the Chinese could have defeated the Americans easily, they worked to keep the matches close, always careful to avoid embarrassing their guests.⁹⁴ This friendly attitude carried over to sightseeing as well. The youngest player on the American squad at age 16, Judy Bockenski, remarked that the team was able to take pictures everywhere they went without having their film taken or even checked. This degree of openness defied the common Western perception of life in a Communist nation.⁹⁵ The lone African-American on the US squad, George Brathwaite wrote of the feelings of solidarity between the Chinese and black Americans. In one hotel the team stayed in, a poster illustrated the oppression of blacks in the United States and drew a parallel between that oppression and the oppression of China by other nations. Brathwaite even felt that he received longer and louder applause from Chinese

⁹² John Roderick, “Americans Visit Great Wall,” *New York Times*, 13 April 1971, 1.

⁹³ “Interview with Tim Boggan – 17/1/97.”

⁹⁴ John Roderick, “Chinese Tact Lets US Lose Gracefully,” *New York Times*, 14 April 1971, 1.

⁹⁵ Bockenski, 142.

fans than his teammates did because he was black.⁹⁶ Some American players went over the top to show their feelings of gratitude toward China. Eighteen year old John Tannehill of Ohio said that he believed Chairman Mao was the greatest moral and intellectual leader in the world, causing a great deal of embarrassment for the rest of the delegation. Fortunately for the US State Department, he contracted food poisoning and was bedridden for most of the trip.⁹⁷

Still, there were disturbing aspects about China witnessed by the American visitors. The poverty was noticeable to all in the delegation. Many houses were nothing more than a covering for a bed and often kitchens were nowhere to be found. Community hospitals were rickety and old with no heat or modern amenities. Additionally, there were anti-American signs everywhere, with slogans like “People of the world, unite and defeat the US aggressors and all their running dogs.” The US team posed for photos under this poster.⁹⁸ A *Time* article highlighted the discrepancies between Mao’s ideals and the realities of China. Despite the Chinese leader’s pronouncements of the lack of materialism in his nation, the people still desired status symbols. Bicycles and wristwatches were sought after and cost a large amount of money. Still, the article concluded, “No outright repression is apparently needed, since the Chinese give every indication of working voluntarily, even zealously, to the point that one observer felt that they literally had no concept of individuality, only of their role within the state.”⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Brathwaite, 90.

⁹⁷ Roderick, 14.

⁹⁸ Bockenski, 174.

⁹⁹ “What They Saw – and Didn’t See,” *Time* 97 (3 May 1971), 27.

While the American team was touring China, President Nixon moved to further improve diplomatic relations. On April 14, 1971, he announced the end of a twenty-year US trade embargo against China, easing currency and shipping controls. The President said that he wanted to take concrete steps to increase the opportunity for US-Chinese contacts. Among the measures announced were expedited visas for visitors from the People's Republic of China (PRC), a relaxation of currency controls to allow the use of dollars in China, permitting American ships to transport Chinese goods, and allowing the export of non-strategic items to the PRC. Nixon also stated that he was willing to consider additional measures should events warrant.¹⁰⁰

The same day that Nixon made that announcement, the American team's trip to China came to a diplomatic climax. Chinese premier Zhou Enlai met with table tennis delegations from Canada, Colombia, England, Nigeria, and the United States. In conversations with each team, Zhou was extremely gracious. In speaking to the Columbian team, the Chinese premier told them that their women's team should have beaten the Chinese squad. For one American player, such remarks were too much: "When talking with the leader of the Colombian delegation, the pleasantries were so saccharine that (to myself) I laughed my head off."¹⁰¹

Zhou had important words for the American team. Greeting the American team captain, Zhou said, "What a joy it is to bring friends from afar. In the past, a lot of American friends have been in China. You have made a start here in bringing more."

¹⁰⁰ Nixon, 548 and "Statement by the President – April 14, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (3 May 1971), 567-568.

¹⁰¹ "Premier Chou Meets Table Tennis Delegations of Canada, Colombia, England, Nigeria, and United States," *Peking Review* 17 (23 April 1971) in Roderick MacFarquhar, ed., *Sino-American Relations, 1949-71* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 253; Bockenski, 174.

Later, the premier made a distinction in terms of relations between the American people and the Chinese people and relations between the two governments: “The people and players of China and the US are friendly to each other.”¹⁰²

There were surreal moments during the meeting between Zhou and the American team as well. Glen Cowan, the American player who had become known for his long hair and flamboyant dress (he wore purple bellbottoms to the meeting with Zhou), asked the Chinese premier about his impressions of the American hippie movement. Zhou speculated that the youth of the United States were dissatisfied with the “peasant” situation and that they were trying to seek out the truth through trying different things. It was the same for him when he was young, Zhou continued, explaining that such movements were not exclusive to the US.¹⁰³

With these comments, Zhou revealed the genius of what the Chinese were attempting to do with ping-pong. By eschewing the traditional diplomacy that the US was using exclusively and utilizing sport instead, the Chinese government found a way of reaching out to the citizens rather than the governments of the West in order to minimize potential dangers and maximize potential gains for China. The American media quickly picked up on what was being done. An editorial in *The Nation* described the Chinese initiative to invite the US table tennis team as one of public relations “genius.” Clearly, the move was made to improve understanding between the American and Chinese peoples. As the American public warmed in its impressions of China, the US government would have an increasingly difficult time maintaining a hostile relationship

¹⁰² “The Ping Heard Round the World,” *Time* 97 (April 26, 1971), 26, 28.

¹⁰³ Tim Boggan, “Chou, 73, and ‘Team Hippie’ Hit It Off,” *New York Times* (15 April 1971), 1, 16.

with the Asian power. Given the nature of American democracy, such understanding between the peoples of both nations would lead to better understanding between the two governments.¹⁰⁴

Fallout

America soon began to try to put the dramatic sporting events into proper perspective. The *New York Times* analyzed the significance of what the Chinese were attempting by looking at the importance of table tennis in China, and its place as the premier Chinese national sport, concluding that the invitation was that much more important. Inviting the American team was not simply a gesture of friendship, but one of national honor. The equivalent would be if President Nixon had invited the Chinese national baseball team to come to the US.¹⁰⁵

The American government also considered the significance of the table tennis invitation and came to a conclusion very similar to that of the media. In an April 14 State Department Intelligence Brief, the Director of Intelligence Research wrote that the invitation was part of a policy of “people’s diplomacy,” spearheaded by Zhou. The goal for the Chinese government was to improve the public opinion of China in order to pressure the US government to soften its foreign policy.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ “Ping Pong Anyone?” *The Nation* 212 (26 April 1971), 514.

¹⁰⁵ Harrison E. Salisbury, “Ping ... Pong ... A New Approach to Diplomacy,” *New York Times* (11 April 1971), E3.

¹⁰⁶ Ray Cline to Acting Secretary Irwin, Intelligence Brief, “Communist-China/US: Peking's People's Diplomacy: A ‘New Page’ in Sino-American Relations,” 14 April 1971, from “Kissinger’s Secret Trip to China,” *National Security Archive* (www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB66/#docs).

President Nixon was overjoyed with the American team's visit to China in general and Zhou's remarks in particular. Two days after the historic meeting in Peking, Nixon spoke before the American Society of Newspaper Editors. In his speech, the President stated that the main goal of his administration was the normalization of relations between the US and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the end of the PRC's isolation in the world. Nixon revealed his personal commitment to accomplishing these goals by outlining a conversation he had recently had with his daughter. He had told her that he hoped that she might have a chance to visit China herself and to see the great cities and meet the people there. Nixon also said that he too hoped to travel to China, but was not sure if it would happen while he was in office.¹⁰⁷

President Nixon received wide praise for his commitment to re-establishing diplomatic relations with China. In a *Life* magazine editorial, the President's policies were credited with being able to draw China out of its isolation and strengthening the US position with respect to the Soviet Union. Thanks to Nixon's efforts, the article stated, it could no longer be assumed by the Kremlin that the US would favor Russia over China in a conflict. Additionally, Nixon's position as an anti-Communist Republican made the American moves possible without seeming to come out of weakness. Only then was the stage set for ping-pong diplomacy.¹⁰⁸

The acclaim for Nixon's China policies was far from universal however. Less than a week after the team meeting with Zhou Enlai, the President came under fire from conservatives within his own party. The cracks in the Republican façade first appeared

¹⁰⁷ "The President's Remarks at a Question and Answer Session with a Panel of Six Editors and Reporters – April 16, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (3 May 1971), 565-567.

¹⁰⁸ "Reopening the Door to China," *Life* 70 (30 April 1971), 52.

within the Administration itself. On April 20, the *New York Times* ran a story about an off-the-record meeting Vice President Spiro Agnew held with eight reporters. During that meeting, the Vice President expressed concern that China had gained too much from the positive manner in which the Chinese people's lives were depicted. The whole spectacle of ping-pong diplomacy, Agnew concluded, was merely an attempt by China to exploit the United States. For that reason, he told reporters, he opposed closer ties with China.¹⁰⁹

Although he tried to rein in his vice president, Nixon soon began to feel additional pressure from his right flank. Conservatives across the country made it known that they felt betrayed by a president who they thought shared their values. These Republican stalwarts believed that movement toward China represented the straw that broke the camel's back after the humiliation of the announcement of gradual withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam, domestic wage and price controls, and a push for guaranteed incomes for the poor. There was even talk that William F. Buckley, Jr., editor of the conservative publication *The National Review*, would lead a group of eastern conservatives in a campaign to "suspend" support from Nixon which in turn could lead to a GOP primary challenger to Nixon's reelection.¹¹⁰

In late April, *The Christian Century*¹¹¹ called into question what benefits, if any, the US stood to gain from closer ties with China. Ping-pong diplomacy, the magazine

¹⁰⁹ RW Apple, Jr., "Agnew Voices Misgivings on the US-China 'Thaw'," *New York Times* (20 April 1971) and Reeves, 317.

¹¹⁰ Reeves, 419.

¹¹¹ *The Christian Century* was established in 1884 by the Christian Century Foundation, a nonprofit and nondenominational organization, dedicated to informing the American public about "the events that are defining religious life today." (<http://www.christiancentury.org/welcome.html>)

held, was conducted on a timetable wholly established by the Chinese, who stood to gain everything. Furthermore, the cultural significance of the game revealed a far more sinister intent. Years earlier, Mao said that he planned a revolution “to the accompaniment of ping pong balls.” Additionally, Peking officials had been known to exhort Chinese team members to hit the ball “as if it were the head of Chiang Kai-shek.” In the end, the article concluded, ping-pong diplomacy represented a continuation of the traditional subversive style of Chinese foreign relations. China was only looking out for itself. The only thing the US could hope to gain was some insight into table tennis techniques.¹¹²

On May 4, 1971, *The National Review* ran an editorial by William F. Buckley, Jr. attacking Nixon’s China policy. In the piece, Buckley maintained that China continued to represent a threat not only to the US, but also to the entire Asian region. If for no other reason than the protection of Japan, the United States could not afford to soften its policy toward China.

It is the further assumption of the Chinese that the best way to do this [influence Japan] is to coo a little in our direction – not officially, but through sports, which is, for the communists, a paramilitary activity. They have found us easy targets. The victory over the American team at ping-pong is no doubt a precursor to more important victories.¹¹³

The magazine did not let up on Nixon’s China policy. Two weeks later, it ran another editorial critical of the President. The piece questioned if the time was ripe for a policy change given that the previous US hard-line policy had yielded good results. Among these positive outcomes included protecting Nationalist forces on Taiwan,

¹¹² “Backspin on the Chinese Serve,” *The Christian Century* 88 (21 April 1971), 483.

¹¹³ William F. Buckley, Jr., “The New China,” *The National Review* 23 (4 May 1971), 497.

allowing them to develop a democratic society, preventing China from spreading communism overseas to Chinese living abroad, keeping South Korea from being overrun in 1950, and helping Japan from succumbing to Chinese domination.¹¹⁴

In September *The National Review* ran an article under the headline, “A Young Conservative Looks at Nixon and China.” The author, Richard Brookhiser, wrote, “I have come to feel that Richard Nixon is a Romantic, and that his attitude toward China rises from a deep seated Romantic vision of politics.” A Romantic, in this context, was an individual who could not conceive that there existed wicked nations in the world who did not want peace. Brookhiser went on to unfavorably compare Nixon to Neville Chamberlain for his failure to see the entire diplomatic field and to Woodrow Wilson for his overreaching foreign policy. The article concluded with a hope that the Tricky Dick of old would reassert himself, and not be blinded by Romanticism.¹¹⁵

The scene in the United States was mainly one of hope for the potential of a new policy toward China. Many Americans felt that there was much to be gained from taking steps to ease tensions between the two nations. Nixon, for his part, remained optimistic that even more could be accomplished during his tenure as president. This is not to say, however, that all praised ping-pong diplomacy. There remained significant conservative elements who believed that rather than making the world safer, bringing China into the world community increased the potential for danger. Still, the President, undaunted by these criticisms, remained determined to go ahead with the policy he had outlined many years before in *Foreign Affairs*.

¹¹⁴ James Burnham, “China Policy: The Balance Sheet,” *The National Review* (18 May 1971), 517-518.

¹¹⁵ Richard Brookhiser, “A Young Conservative Looks at Nixon and China,” *The National Review* (24 September 1971), 1056, 1171-1073.

Reaction to ping-pong diplomacy had international repercussions. Improving relations between the United States and China had an impact not isolated to those two nations, but was felt around the world. In terms of Cold War diplomacy, the Soviet Union was particularly hard hit. Having been an ally of China since the Communist takeover in 1950, the USSR was understandably nervous about what this athletic diplomacy could mean for them.

It did not take long for American media to realize how the Chinese invitation to the American team might be perceived in other nations. *China News Analysis* contrasted how China was treating the US and the USSR. Although the Chinese had refused to send a delegation to Moscow for the annual Party Congress, they had invited US players and newsmen to their nation to play games. The article concluded that Peking had little to lose and much to gain. There was the potential for diplomatic recognition by the West, admittance to the United Nations, but above all else, the chance to make Moscow nervous.¹¹⁶

The US tried to reassure the Soviet Union publicly, however. In an April 15 press conference, White House Press Secretary Ronald Ziegler said that the US was not trying to embarrass or unduly pressure Russia. Chinese-American relations were unrelated to Soviet-US relations. Still, Ziegler made an effort to reinforce recent gains by again calling the Peking government the “People’s Republic of China” rather than “Communist China.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ “The Paris Commune and Sino-Soviet Relations,” *China News Analysis* 838 (16 April 1971), 2.

¹¹⁷ Terrence Smith, “Soviet Assured by US on China,” *New York Times* (16 April 1971), 1.

It appeared to some that the US had entered into a new phase of relations with China that could be best described as “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin made statements at the 24th Party Congress implying that Sino-Soviet relations were unsatisfactory. Given this tension, if new developments were to take place based on a positive relationship between American and China, there existed the potential for great diplomatic progress, the *New York Times* speculated. China might help the US withdraw from Vietnam; the two nations could reach an agreement on Taiwan; the US might support allowing China a seat on the UN Security Council. Through all of this, Russia would be left on the outside looking in.¹¹⁸ On April 22, the *New York Times* reported that a USSR foreign affairs weekly had condemned China for not looking to the Communist Bloc for assistance and for reaching out to the US instead. The Russian article slammed China for having a history of betraying its friends in an effort to become an international power. Although the US had made some small steps, the Russian piece concluded, the Americans would not give in on Taiwan and China would never get what it really wanted.¹¹⁹

The next day, the US government attempted to reach out to Russia again. In a State Department press conference, Secretary Rogers reiterated that it was not the goal of the US to make the Soviets nervous – that the US was not playing some sort of political game. It just made good sense, the Secretary said, to have good relations with a nation of

¹¹⁸ Harry Schwartz, “Triangular Politics and China,” *New York Times* (19 April 1971), 37.

¹¹⁹ Theodore Shabad, “Soviet Denounces Chinese Reds For Shift on Relations With US,” *New York Times* (22 April 1971), 12.

700 million people.¹²⁰ Less than a week later, Nixon hit a similar theme at his own press conference when he said that the US was not trying to irritate Russia. Rather, the US wanted good relations with the Soviet Union as well and it made little sense for world peace to have Russia and China at each other's throats.¹²¹

The US continued to move toward China as the White House announced on May 7 that steps had been taken to further improve trade between the two nations. The Treasury Department lifted all remaining restrictions on the dollar to allow it to be used in transactions with the Chinese people and the Department of Commerce lifted bans on the servicing of Chinese vessels by American companies.¹²²

Even with this announcement, the Nixon Administration continued to position itself between China and the Soviet Union by reassuring the Soviets. On three separate occasions that summer, President Nixon attempted to reach out to Moscow by reiterating that the motivation behind establishing positive relations with China had nothing to do with the USSR, but instead represented a desire to have friendly relations with all countries. As the President said on July 15, "Any nation can be our friend without being any other nation's enemy."¹²³

¹²⁰ "Secretary Rogers' News Conference of April 23," *Department of State Bulletin* (10 May 1971), 596.

¹²¹ "President Nixon's News Conference of April 29," *Department of State Bulletin* (17 April 1971), 633.

¹²² "New Regulations Announced on Trade With the People's Republic of China – May 7, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (31 May 1971), 702-704.

¹²³ "President Nixon Briefs Editors and Publishers from Twelve Southern States – May 25, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (14 June 1971), 758-759; "President Nixon Briefs Media Executives From Thirteen Middle Western States – July 6, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (26 July 1971), 95-96; "President Nixon Announces Acceptance of Invitation to Visit People's Republic of China – July 15, 1971," *Department of State Bulletin* (2 August 1971), 121.

One must still question the Nixon Administration's true motivations, even in light of these seemingly earnest pronouncements about the purity of US intentions toward China. As mentioned earlier, Secretary of State Rogers had sent a memorandum two years before outlining the positive results the US could hope to achieve by improving relations with China eighteen months before Nixon's acceptance of an invitation to travel to China. Foremost of these was an attempt to hurt Russia: "Such an effort would also serve our long-term interest of forestalling an eventual more fundamental rapprochement between the USSR and China."¹²⁴ So despite the Nixon Administration's pleas of innocence, it appears that the new, softer US policy toward China achieved at least one of its objectives – making the Soviet Union less certain of its own security with respect to both the United States and China.

Ping-pong made headlines across the United States following the Chinese invitation. It appeared that everyone wanted to be associated with the game. After returning home to the United States, the American team was called to the White House. In the public ceremony there, the US Table Tennis Association made Nixon an honorary member and announced that the organization would host a Chinese table tennis delegation on a tour of the US the following year.¹²⁵

Not to allow the People's Republic to monopolize the issue, Taiwan sent its own table tennis delegation to the US in August 1971. A religious team, the Taiwanese claimed that their intent was to spread Christianity, not Communism, in an effort to emphasize what the US and the Chinese nationalists still had in common. Said Chuin-

¹²⁴ "Memorandum from Secretary of State Rogers to President Nixon, December 2, 1969" (Document 308), in Duncombe, 800.

¹²⁵ "Table-Tennis Group Enrolls the President," *New York Times* (3 May 1971), 75.

Hui Nee, a 22-year old team member, “We couldn’t understand how a democratic country like the United States could have anything to do with the totalitarian regime on the mainland.” However, the US national team refused to play the visiting Taiwanese, claiming that having invited the PRC to America, it would have been an insult to play the Nationalists first. Instead, the Taiwanese squad had to be satisfied competing against college teams.¹²⁶

Internationally, other nations attempted to follow the ping-pong diplomatic path and used the game to make foreign policy statements. In October, French Secretary for Commerce, Jean Bailly, signaled his country’s rekindled friendship with China by playing a table tennis match against Chinese Minister for Foreign Trade, Pai Hsian-Kuo onboard a Chinese ship in Marseilles harbor.¹²⁷ The following August, Thailand announced that it too would be sending a table tennis team to China and that a Thai official was expected to meet with Zhou Enlai. Analysts at the time noted that Thailand had traditionally been staunchly anti-Communist, but speculated that the team was being sent to China out of fear of being left behind by the new US policy.¹²⁸

The role of ping-pong diplomacy was fully sealed almost exactly a year after the initial Chinese invitation, when in April 1972, a Chinese table tennis team visited the US. The Chinese team was sponsored by the National Committee on United States-China Relations (NCUSCR), an educational organization established in 1966 to improve American understanding of China. The NCUSCR financed the visit through

¹²⁶ “Victorious Taiwan Table-Tennis Team on Tour of US is Armed With Bibles and Paddles,” *New York Times* (31 August 1971), 9.

¹²⁷ “High Level Table Tennis,” *New York Times* (7 October 1971), 5.

¹²⁸ Bernard Gwertzman, “Thai Official is Expected to Meet Chou On Table Tennis Team’s Trip to Peking,” *New York Times* (9 August 1972), 3.

contributions from such individuals as John D. Rockefeller 4th, Frank Sinatra, and John McCone, the former head of the CIA.¹²⁹

During its three-week stay, the Chinese team visited a number of sites across the United States and held demonstration matches for interested spectators. They toured a Chrysler plant in Detroit, playing against employees and invited United Auto Workers president Leonard Woodcock to come to China.¹³⁰ A trip to New York and an exhibition match at the United Nations followed. Initially, the plan was for the Chinese to play in the General Assembly chamber, but the matches were moved when objections were raised about the appropriateness of holding a sporting event there.¹³¹ The team then stopped in Washington, DC to meet with President Nixon before moving on to California for another meeting, this time with Mickey Mouse. Reporters noted that although the Chinese shook hands with many characters in Disneyland, they all recognized the iconic mouse.¹³²

The Chinese team was fully aware of their purpose and the significance the trip to the States. On the eve of leaving China, Song Shung, the acting president of the Table Tennis Association of China, told reporters,

The United States table tennis delegation visit to our country last April has strengthened understanding and friendship between the peoples of China and the United States. The Chinese table tennis delegation shall return the visit to the United States with this same desire.¹³³

¹²⁹ Kathleen Teltsch, "A 'Warm Reception' Promised to Chinese Table Tennis Team," *New York Times* (2 February 1972), 2.

¹³⁰ Jerry M. Flynt, "China's Table Tennis Smash in Detroit," *New York Times* (14 April 1971), 2.

¹³¹ Murry Schumach, "China's Table Tennis Team Visits City, Plays at UN," *New York Times* (20 April 1971), 1.

¹³² "Team Meets Mickey Mouse," *New York Times* (27 April 1971), 24.

¹³³ "Chinese Table Tennis Team Set to Begin Tour of US April 10," *New York Times* (22 March 1971), 40.

After arriving in the US, the Chinese went out of their way not to humiliate their hosts during matches. Although they could have easily beaten the Americans, they worked to keep matches close. As one Chinese player said, “Winning is temporary, but friendship is permanent.”¹³⁴

Perspective

The diplomatic breakthrough in Sino-American relations in the early 1970s was due to both US and Chinese efforts. Richard Nixon came to the White House believing strongly about the need to reach out to the Asian power. His overtures were made with traditional diplomatic tools – through the lifting of trade, currency, and other economic sanctions. But while these measures signaled American willingness to engage China and welcome the nation back into the world community, they lacked a feeling of personal warmth – a signal that there was something more than economics motivating them.

In China, Nixon found a willing collaborator in Zhou Enlai. Long a moderating force within Mao’s regime, Zhou believed that by reaching out to the US, China would be able to signal its independence from the Soviet Union and establish itself as an important force in its own right. Zhou’s genius was in both recognizing the opportunity that the Nixon Administration had presented to him and in finding an unconventional way of responding that promised dramatic gains with minimal risk.

The place of table tennis within Chinese society and the Communist regime’s traditional use of it in particular and sport in general made the game a unique tool. As we

¹³⁴ Steve Cady, “Chinese Go Easy on US, Win Table Tennis, 4-1,” *New York Times* (21 April 1971), 29.

have seen, and will discuss further, the way in which sport was viewed in the United States was far different from how it was seen in the Communist world. For that reason, the US was caught completely off guard when the diplomatic breakthrough they had long searched for came in the area of athletics rather than trade. By relegating sports merely to the realm of recreation, America had reduced the opportunity to use it as a valuable diplomatic tool during the Cold War. China placed sport at the center of its state establishment, and, therefore, was able to more easily recognize the diplomatic opportunity that the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships presented.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the United States merits a mixed evaluation in terms of the diplomatic use of athletics during the Cold War. In Cuba, the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations completely missed the boat by not recognizing the value of baseball to maintain a measure of relations with Castro. Effectively, the US responded to the Castro regime by taking its ball and bat home and refusing to play. In light of the willingness of the Cuban people as a whole, and Castro in particular, to continue to engage the United States through baseball, this was poor decision. Much more could have been gained by coming to an understanding with Castro whereby the Sugar Kings would have stayed in Cuba and would have continued to participate in the International League.

As for Nixon, although he was a reactor rather than an initiator in the game of ping-pong diplomacy, he deserves praise for coming around in the end by inviting the Chinese table tennis squad to the US for a tour of their own. In doing so, he sealed the gains made not only by his earlier lifting of trade and travel sanctions on China, but the American team's visit to China in the spring of 1971. Ping-pong serves as an apt metaphor for what Zhou and Nixon were able to accomplish – being willing to step up to the table, engage each other, and bounce diplomatic balls back and forth.

In examining the missed potential of baseball in Cuba following the 1959 Revolution and the way in which China took the initiative in using table tennis to

reestablish productive relations with the United States in 1971, the question that arises is why the US failed to look at sports as a diplomatic tool during the Cold War. There are several reasons for this: the perceived negative result of participation in the 1936 Berlin Olympics; the nature of American politics during the Cold War; and the traditional role of athletics within US society. All three of these factors conspired to prevent US political leaders and foreign policy elites from seriously considering using sports to either maintain diplomatic relations with Cuba or to reestablish positive ties with China.

Through studying the Cold War, it is impossible to overestimate the impact that historical memory of the events leading up to the Second World War had on the direction of American foreign policy. For many in key policy-making positions in the US government, the failure of the allies to effectively deal with Adolph Hitler early on was the defining diplomatic moment of their formative years. Many of these political leaders looked back on the 1936 Olympic Games with regret for not preventing the German leader's advance. Having been chosen the site for the Olympics years before Hitler's rise to power, Berlin was the focus of much controversy after the Nazi takeover of Germany. Alarmed at the nature of the Fascist government in central Europe, the United States and many other nations debated whether or not it was appropriate to send their Olympic teams to the Games. On one side, many argued that sending their squads would imply approval of Hitler's government and its ideology. Others, however, maintained that the Olympics represented a higher ideal of sportsmanship, and that the purity of the Games would not be compromised by the Nazi regime.¹

¹ Richard D. Mandell, *The Nazi Olympics* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 275-293; Arnud Kruger and William Murry, eds., *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

In the end, those favoring participation in the Berlin Olympics won out, and there was no boycott of the Games. However, Hitler proved the opponents of participation correct, as he manipulated the competition into a showcase for his government. Even the inspiring and heroic performance by the US's Jesse Owens, an African-American sprinter and long jumper, was not enough to fully blunt the Nazi leader's message. Although American journalists claimed that the US had "won" the 1936 games on the strength of performances in track and field and in diving, German athletes displayed their athletic superiority, winning gold in 33 events, silver in 26, and bronze in 30.²

As the 1936 Games came to a close, Hitler told reporters that universal participation by the rest of the world showed the correctness of his government and the widespread acceptance of its policies. Even if the athletic world's presence in Berlin did not necessarily signal universal accommodation with the racist and anti-Semitic nature of the Nazi regime, as historian Allen Guttman writes, "... thousands of visitors left Berlin with a sense of aesthetic fulfillment and a vague impression that National Socialism wasn't as dreadful as they had thought."³

Looking back on the Berlin Olympics in the aftermath of World War II, many in the United States concluded that it had been a mistake to go to the '36 Games. Despite public protests to the contrary, actions spoke louder than words, and it was difficult to deny that sending American team signaled tacit acceptance of Hitler's regime. Some went even farther to conclude that the success derived from the Olympics encouraged

² Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 67.

later Nazi policies of aggression.⁴ Given these lessons learned from the 1936 Olympics, it becomes easier to understand why American leaders were hesitant during the Cold War to use sports as a diplomatic tool with the Soviet bloc – there was a nagging belief that athletic engagement would imply an acceptance of Communist ideology by the West.

In a similar vein, the nature of domestic politics during the Cold War further contributed to the hesitance to use sport diplomatically. By the mid-1950s, the perceived threat of the Soviet Union and the expansion of Communism around the world had risen to such a fevered pitch that merely the perception of having a soft foreign policy toward the Soviet Bloc was enough to destroy the electoral viability of any politician. With that in mind, political parties and candidates competed against each other to prove who was tougher on communism. During the 1952 presidential race, Dwight Eisenhower attributed the fall of China to Communist forces to the foreign policy of President Truman and eight years later John F. Kennedy took a similar path when he accused Vice President Nixon of being part of the Administration that presided over the fall of Cuba.⁵ As stated earlier, having won election at least in part on a get-tough-on-Castro platform, Kennedy could ill afford to back down in his policy toward the island.

In this way, the specter of communism served to poison the American political environment during the Cold War. Out of fear of being perceived as soft on the Communist threat, policies of accommodation with Cuba were discounted from the very start. It would have been politically difficult for Kennedy to allow continued

⁴ Mandell, 275-293.

⁵ Herbert Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York: The Dial Press, 1983), 45.

participation of American athletes in Cuban baseball.⁶ However, if he had been courageous and done so, it is possible that an athletic relationship might have served as a bridge, if only a small one, between the two nations. Although such a connection between the United States and Cuba might not appear to be hugely significant on first glance, baseball could have been used to maintain at least a measure of positive communication between Americans and Cubans. Given the resulting four-plus decades of hostility between the two nations, it is worth at least considering ways in which some interaction could have existed while still allowing each side to save face.

Unlike Kennedy, Nixon found himself in a position to reach out to the Communist Bloc without fear of his political credibility being completely destroyed because of his strong background of being tough on the Soviet bloc.⁷ Still, as Nixon officials worked to reestablish diplomatic relations with China, the methods that they chose were exclusively in the realm of trade and travel. It does not appear that anyone in the White House or State Department ever considered using athletics as a way to make a breakthrough.⁸ Given American perception of sport, this oversight is perhaps not surprising.

The way in which the American public perceived sports during the Cold War greatly contributed to the failure of the US government to recognize the potential of

⁶ Kennedy faced strong domestic pressure from significant segments of the American population to be tough on Castro's regime. Besides fighting against an image of being too young and too soft to effectively stand against the threat of Communism, the Cuban-American community was quickly becoming an important political bloc in south Florida.

⁷ During Nixon's early years in politics as a member of the House of Representatives, he established a reputation for having strong anti-Communist credentials. For more, see Richard Reeves, *President Nixon: Alone in the White House*.

⁸ An examination of *Foreign Relations of the United States* and the *Department of State Bulletin* reveals intense Administration discussions of how to signal American willingness to improve relations with China. However, at no point was sport mentioned as a tool in this effort.

athletics in diplomacy. In the United States, sports were, and have continued to be, primarily a private-sector industry. While there are many Americans, including politicians, who are passionate about athletics, sport on the whole has never been directed from above by the government. With very few exceptions, sports have always been private, regional ventures, pitting the team of one city or state against that of another. National teams have always held secondary importance to professional clubs, with the possible exception of the quadrennial Olympics.

The place of sport in socialist nations during the Cold War provides a sharp contrast to the United States.⁹ For Communist nations during this period, athletics were vitally important ways through which the viability and correctness of their regimes could be proven to the world. Countries such as China, the Soviet Union, and East Germany put large amounts of time, effort, and money into national teams, which were put forward as penultimate of athletic achievement. These nations saw these squads as extensions of their national identity and took pride in their success on the international stage. For many Communist nations, athletic success was not peripheral to national self-perception – they were one in the same.¹⁰ In this light, that Zhou Enlai chose table tennis to signal China's willingness to improve diplomatic relations with the US while such an option never appeared to have occurred to President Nixon reveals a great deal about the place of sport in both Chinese and US cultures.

⁹ For more on the contrast of the role of athletics in US culture and its place in Cuban society, see Eric A. Wagner, "Sport in Revolutionary Societies: Cuba and Nicaragua," in Joseph L. Arbena, ed., *Sport and Society in Latin America: Diffusion, Dependency, and the Rise of Mass Culture* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 119-122.

¹⁰ *Sports in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973).

What, then, are the lessons to be learned from our studies of Cuba and China? First, it is important to recognize the extent to which the Cold War influenced policies and politics in the United States. The perceived threat of the Soviet Bloc was so great that it precluded politicians from even considering certain policy paths that might have made them appear weak in the eyes of the public or their political opponents. The power of the Cold War, coupled with the relegation of sport to a secondary place in American society, conspired to limit the diplomatic tools available to foreign policy elites to traditional measures such as trade and travel restrictions.

Additionally, we have seen the power and potential of sport in diplomacy. In Cuba, we saw the passion with which the Cuban people followed baseball, not only domestically but in the United States as well.¹¹ This passion for the game and Castro's desire to keep the Sugar Kings in Havana could have been used by the US to maintain a toehold in Cuba, even as formal diplomatic ties were severed. In this way, diplomacy could have been conducted on two levels – the formal level of State Department-directed policy of severing relations with the Castro regime, and an informal athletic track of working to preserve a positive presence on the island in the form of baseball.

In China, we saw the extent to which the Communist government directed athletics, and how much stock was placed in the success of their teams in international competition.¹² For these reasons, Zhou's response to President Nixon's lifting of trade and travel bans not with economic measures, but with an invitation for a group of young American athletes to visit China and compete in table tennis matches is understandable.

¹¹ Beezley, 20.

¹² *Sports in China* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1973).

Still, this was a response that Nixon never expected.¹³ In taking such an action, the Chinese were able to make the diplomatic breakthrough between the two nations more dramatic in the eyes of the international community as a whole in a way that an announcement of increased trade never would have.

Given these situations, had the United States worked to engage either or both countries athletically, the repercussions would have been felt far beyond the playing field. Sport could have been used to establish diplomatic relations, which would have been mutually beneficial. In the end, this should be the ultimate goal for American diplomacy in the world.

Finally, this study underscores the need for diplomats to maintain a willingness to consider unconventional diplomatic methods. Doing so presents opportunities for great gains with minimal risks. If a sporting overture is rejected, a nation has a natural separation from it and can plausibly state that such a rejection is not a direct affront. But at the same time, if such an opening is accepted, it will make headlines around the world and will be considered a much greater success than a comparable economic opening. Although the Cold War has been over for more than a decade, we can hope that future diplomats will keep their minds open to sport as a tool for international relations.

¹³ As Nixon wrote in his memoirs, "I was as surprised as I was pleased by this news. I had never expected that the China initiative would come to fruition in the form of a Ping-Pong team. We immediately approved the acceptance of the invitation," Nixon, 548.

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