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Patriotism Post 9/11 and Contraction

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Now back in the country among My Fellow Americans, but still wandering the highways and byways, I watch with some interest the spectacle of the baseball playoffs and the World Series in the new Post-9/11 World. I am struck by the intensity of the patriotic pageantry prior to each game. The often beautiful and moving singing of the National Anthem; the excessive displays of the red, white and blue; President Bush throwing out the first ball at the World Series; all conspire to mark these events as great moments of communal remembrance and/or celebration.

As often is the case with My Fellow Americans, at some point the celebration and remembrance has run into excess. Will we soon know how big a flag can be and still fit onto a baseball playing field? Has anyone ever doubted Joe Buck's patriotism? Is it really necessary to show Mayor Guliani over and over again in his box seat of power at Yankee Stadium? Which player will be the first to have a flag painted on his front tooth? Where will it end? Will it ever end?

Perhaps of greater curiosity who will be the first to have the courage to return "Take Me Out to the Ball Game," to its position as the music of choice for the seventh-inning stretch? I always found it the most American of songs and now it has been replaced by overblown productions of "God Bless America." I do know there is a war on. I also know that God is not any more likely to be backing "Dubya" and his band of merry men, than Allah is to be guarding Ben Laden's cave.

Perhaps the first signs that some semblance of normality is returning come from the recent discussions of the "C" word. "Contraction" has been uttered in the corridors of baseball power, even while the last words of "God Bless America" echo off the facade at Yankee Stadium.

This is an expression of normality, not reason. It is an expression of normality precisely because in this discussion there is little regard for reason. The Lords of Baseball once again seem to be in the forefront of those who seek to denigrate their game while simultaneously offering phony and misguided solutions to the problems that dog the National Pastime at the opening of the 21st Century.

The first discussion I saw of the contraction issue came in the Canadian press. In a story out of Windsor, Ontario, it was reported that both the Expos and Marlins were either about to go out of business, or were to be melded into the Devil Rays and Angels respectively. The Byzantine details are beyond my ability to relate but it seems that when it was all over there would still be teams in St. Petersburg and Anaheim but not in Montreal or Miami.

Subsequent reports have included the demise of the Minnesota Twins. The only scenario that seems consistent in all these reports is that there will be no team in Montreal, and there will be a team in Tampa Bay when all is finished.

What are we to make of this? First, the notion that a team will still be in St. Petersburg when all is said and done is the highest form of madness in the mix. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays are a team born out of a lawsuit, playing in one of the worst facilities in baseball that was out of date before it ever housed major league baseball, in a location with major accessibility problems. This is a team that should never have been, and it cannot be eliminated soon enough. It would seem however that the Lords of Baseball are almost certain to keep baseball in "The Can;" one mistake clearly deserving another.

As for the Marlins, it is difficult to argue for a franchise that was dismantled by its previous owner who alienated a community to the point that any chance of getting a real baseball stadium was destroyed. Now that it has a new owner one can be a little sympathetic, but no one forced its purchase on the owner. The city of Miami seems reluctant to give its heart or its tax dollars to a franchise which was allowed to treat them so cynically.

The Minnesota Twins case is even more bizarre. This is a franchise that drew 1.8M fans this season to watch a young and exciting team play in a dreadful facility. True it would be nice to have a new outdoor facility for the Twins, but in point of fact they are a franchise on the rise, one that might yet get a new stadium, but one that is not on the edge of disaster. The Twins Cities remains a strong, although smaller, market. Given this year's success they will likely go over two million in attendance next season.

As to the Anaheim Angels how can anyone doubt that Los Angeles is able to support two baseball teams if both are properly managed and marketed? Mismanagement cannot be allowed to be an excuse for the death of a franchise although it may be a reason to seek new management. Even Disney and Eisner can foul things up, but this is not a franchise in irretrievable distress.

As for the Expos it is difficult to see them staying in Montreal. Too many mistakes have already been made and it would appear that it would take some sort of miracle to bring the fans back to the cavernous confines of Olympic Stadium. Moving them to Northern Virginia would be preferable to elimination. This may not be possible if Peter Angelos is still holding sway over Acting Commissioner for Life, Bud Selig. Angelos doesn't want any competition for his Orioles and Selig seems to owe him for past support.

So instead of looking for real solutions to real problems, it would appear that the Lords of Baseball are on their way to finding faux solutions for non-problems leaving most of the real problems to fester. The only ones to be fooled in this process will be themselves.

Just because the Lords of Baseball love America and have wrapped themselves in red, white, and blue, doesn't mean they are to be trusted with the fate of the National Pastime.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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