

1-10-2006

Cuba, Bush, the IBAF, and the WBC

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Cuba, Bush, the IBAF, and the WBC" (2006). *On Sport and Society*. 740.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/740>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Cuba, Bush, the IBAF, and the WBC
JANUARY 10, 2006

It seemed like such a good idea, one whose time had finally come. Then in one sweeping ruling the Bush Administration dealt what could be a fatal blow to another of Bud Selig's dreams. The World Baseball Classic scheduled for March may well end in a shambles. Only a nod from the man who once seemed destined to be Commissioner of Baseball can save Selig's dream. One can only wonder what would have happened if George Bush had become Commissioner of Baseball. The implications for baseball and the world are mind-boggling.

The ruling against the participation of Cuba in the World Baseball Classic came from the Treasury Department, not the Oval Office. It is a ruling in line with Administration policies designed to keep Cuban artists, performers, and athletes out of the U.S. If they are to be paid, or if their American appearance enhances their international reputations and income, these Cubans will not be admitted to the U.S. The idea is to keep hard currency out of the hands of Fidel Castro.

This policy is akin to that which prohibits the sending of U.S. dollars to any Cuban citizen except for immediate family. A friend, who has been the sole support of an elderly aunt and uncle on the island for years, is no longer allowed to send them money for their survival under these new policies. Compassionate Conservatism has many faces.

Under prodding from such groups as the Cuban American National Foundation (CANF) and the insistence of Republican Congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart from Miami, the Treasury Department ruled against Cuban participation. This ensures that no visas will be issued to the Cuban baseball team. Major League Baseball is scrambling to re-apply on behalf of Cuban participation by guaranteeing the Treasury Department that Cuba will not receive any income from the tourney. In the meantime the plans are moving forward for the Classic. Tickets are being sold, merchandise is being sold, and the hype has begun. All this may be for naught.

A few days ago, the International Baseball Federation (IBAF), the ruling body for International Baseball, warned the United States that any ban of Cuba would result in the IBAF withdrawing its sanctioning of the World Baseball Classic. Such an action

would likely lead to the departure of most of the participants in the tournament who are IBAF members. In addition, Puerto Rico, a host for an early round of the tournament, says it will withdraw as host if Cuba is barred from participation. Venezuela announced that it was opposed to the ban and would offer Caracas as an alternative site for the tourney.

The IBAF, as a member of the International Olympic Committee, says it must abide by the rules of that body which hold that "any form of discrimination to a country or person on grounds of race, politics, gender or otherwise is incompatible with the Olympic movement." This, says the IBAF, means it must withdraw its sanction of the World Baseball Classic. In addition, some members of the IOC indicate that U.S. policy will negatively impact any future American bid to host the Olympic Games.

Within the American sporting press the actions of the Bush Administration have prompted considerable consternation and some confusion. Only six months ago Cuba participated in the Concacaf Gold Cup soccer tournament in Seattle and Foxboro, Massachusetts. Indeed, over the years Cuban athletes have participated in numerous activities in the United States. Often this has proven embarrassing to Cuba as there have been a number of defections associated with these events.

Across the baseball world and the political world the Cuban policy of the U.S. is under fire. National baseball federations have objected to the U.S. action, world print and electronic media have condemned the action, and U.S. allies are increasingly critical of the entire scope of American policy towards Cuba.

Apparently the rules of the game have changed. U.S. athletes will continue to be allowed to compete against Cuban athletes outside the U.S., but Cuban athletes, along with many other prominent literary and artistic figures, will not be allowed in the U.S. The CANF and the south Florida madness manifested in the Elian Gonzalez affair have hijacked U.S. Foreign Policy.

The Cuban lobby has overreached its influence and is increasingly alienating the American public, even those of conservative bent. It is also alienating an increasing number of Cuban-Americans who do not wish to be associated with these fanatics. Sport and the arts, not to mention American national and international interests generally, cannot be allowed to be held hostage by this special interest group. Much more is at stake here beyond a mere baseball tournament.

All of this is reminiscent of the China Lobby of the nineteen-forties, a combination of businessmen and missionaries, who led the United States into a policy of non-recognition of the Peoples Republic of China and froze American policy in Asia into a hostile Cold War stance for three decades. It took President Nixon's dramatic reversal of policy in the early seventies to break the madness.

There is no good reason to deny Cuban participation in what should have been a great international baseball event. One can only hope that the former owner of the Texas Rangers will do the right thing and follow the example of President Nixon, rather than to continue the politically expedient pandering to the fanatics in South Florida.

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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