

# Baseball Bashes Itself in Blue Ribbon Report

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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Clearly the biggest surprise in this week's blue ribbon panel report on the state of baseball is the fact that George Will prefers a command economy over free enterprise, and that he is foursquare in favor of installing socialist principles into the very fabric of the national pastime. It makes one wonder who really won the Cold War. Say it ain't so, Geo!

It is also no surprise that at the All Star break baseball officials trot out a report which decries everything wrong with the game, rather than celebrating what is right with baseball. Long-time baseball analyst Leonard Koppett points out that the national pastime is currently in the middle of a Golden Age. Ignoring this, baseball leadership does its best to turn this occasion of celebration into a launching pad for yet another jeremiad.

To underline their tendency to accentuate the negative when reporting on baseball, the press spent more time decrying those who were not at the game due to injury, than celebrating the achievements of those many stars and burgeoning stars who were in Atlanta.

There was so much negative surrounding this game that I was shocked to read a note from my son telling us what a great experience it was to be in Atlanta for both the game and the home run derby. His advice was to move quickly to get tickets, airline and hotel reservations for next year's festivities in Seattle. His elation and that of many other fans remains a well-concealed secret.

The panel, led by President Richard Levin of Yale University and including conservative guru George Will and former Senator George Mitchell, after several months of study reports that there is a payroll imbalance in baseball, that there is a corresponding competitive imbalance, and that a lot of teams are losing money. Most any child who follows the game could have told us this without months of study. Most anyone who knows much about baseball could tell us that this has nearly always been the case.

There also is a shortage of good pitching.

In it's least credible claim the panel reports that in the last five years 27 teams have lost money, including the Atlanta

Braves, the Dodgers and Cubs. Even George Will would not believe this bit of nonsense unless it was told to him by Ronald Reagan or apparently the baseball owners.

What is proposed as a solution is a form of revenue sharing that will require minimum spending on payrolls, a redistribution of television and gate receipts, and the socialization of other newer revenue streams. There is no proposal for a salary cap, no doubt a concession to the Players Association and the fact that the 1994-95 strike centered on that issue.

So not much new was to be found within the report and the chances of implementation of any significant revenue sharing remains a major question mark. We do know that in formulating the report the panel relied on information from the owners and Commissioner's office. It did not consult players or their representatives for their views on any of these matters. Not surprisingly then the report was not immediately embraced by Donald Fehr, while Marvin Miller surfaced to attack both its assumptions and conclusions.

All of this is highly predictable, and one can only hope that in the end despite all that has been done and not done, said and not said, that somehow the game will survive. And of course it will. Whether individual franchises and owners survive is another story, a reality faced by millions in the business world on a daily basis.

At this week's meetings two other decisions were made. First, the leagues will go back to an unbalanced schedule, something required if the divisions in baseball are to have real meaning and if divisional races in September are to have a bit more excitement.

Another decision was to postpone realignment. One gets the sense in this decision that the Commissioner has not been able to put together a consensus on this matter. It is clear that the attractiveness and certain economies of the game could be improved with geographic realignment.

Although this could disrupt some rivalries in the short run, it should have the overall effect of enhancing regional rivalries and sparking interest. Local communities are still, after all is said and done, the heart of a team's identity, and local pride is at the heart of loyalty to a team. When that pride and loyalty can be focused over and against others within the region

all the attendant feelings are intensified and interest in the games and teams is enhanced.

I hope that the Commissioner will not give up on his quest for realignment, and that when it comes it will be radical rather than timid.

Meanwhile I would hope that someone would discover that baseball is in better shape than we are led to think. Let George Will go back to attacking the Clintons, George Mitchell stick with easier issues such as Northern Ireland, and the President of Yale go back to New Haven and dream the dreams of Bart Giamatti.

As for the rest of us, let's go to the ballpark and cheer the games and the plays and the players. That still is the bottom line that most matters.

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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