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“Patriotic Industry”

Baseball's Reluctant Sacrifice in World War I

PAUL HENSLER

Nearly a century ago—as the Red Sox and White Sox held sway over the American League, and the National League was dominated by teams in the Northeast corridor—the United States found itself in a super-heated atmosphere of patriotic fervor. In the spring of 1917, the continuing and expanding German pugnacity on the high seas coupled with the revelation of the nefarious Zimmerman telegram, forced an agonized President Woodrow Wilson to abrogate his reelection pledge to stay out of the fight. In early April, he asked Congress for and received a declaration of war against Germany.

With America's participation as an active combatant now a reality, the nation's mobilization lurched into high gear, and to remove any trace of doubt as to the worthiness of the United States's commitment to the conflict, the Wilson administration sought to encourage—others would say coerce—a skeptical public into supporting the war effort. Legislation, in the form of the Alien Act, the Trading with the Enemy Act, the Sedition Act, and the Espionage Act, was adopted to squelch dissent of any kind among the populace, while the propaganda machinery embodied in the Committee on Public Information, created by the administration and fronted by George Creel, was chief among the instruments of promoting, indeed enforcing, patriotism. Associations such as the American Protective League, described by the historian David Kennedy as practicing “the excesses of a quasi-vigilante organization” with the blessing of the Justice Department, intimidated the United States citizenry into toeing the patriotic line so that the ultimate defeat of the Central Powers could be hastened.¹

In 1917, baseball became immersed in this cauldron. The exigencies of the time dictated that young men be conscripted into the armed services or otherwise employed in war industry, such as working in a shipyard, munitions plant, or steel mill, to prepare the American military for action in Europe. On May 19, 1917, the government officially instituted the Selective Service Act,

subjecting men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty—later expanded to a range of eighteen to forty-five years—to conscription. Eventually 24 million men (44 percent of all American males) would be registered; 6.5 million were deemed fit for service, with 2.7 million finally serving in the army during hostilities.² Given these numbers, it was only natural that a swelling of the military ranks would include athletes from the worlds of baseball, football, boxing, and tennis. As the national pastime lost increasing numbers to the war effort, baseball became increasingly resistant to the drain of players from its teams' lineups.

A nationwide Army Registration Day, held on June 5, 1917, was an unqualified success because Secretary of War Newton Baker and Provost Marshal General Enoch Crowder employed the small tendrils of local draft boards overseen by men who in most cases were friends, neighbors, or at least acquaintances of many of their regional enlistees, thus avoiding the poor response rates that Baker and Crowder knew had hampered Union conscription attempts during the Civil War, in which high-ranking—and imposing—military officers comprised the committees that decided what men were to be inducted into the army.

For baseball's part, however, two weeks before Registration Day, National League president John Tener wrote to the NL club owners opining that he felt "no obligation, either fixed or moral, that we should depart from our daily routine of business" of playing scheduled games.³ Days later the National Commission—comprised of Tener, American League president Ban Johnson, and commission head August Herrmann—asked that each team "co-operate heartily" with the registration event not by postponing games but by ensuring that "bands be engaged to play patriotic music . . . where games are scheduled on that day."⁴ Those obligated to register could do so from seven o'clock in the morning until nine o'clock that evening, and rather than overplay their patriotism by postponing contests, the commission felt that music would sufficiently convey "public expression of the willingness on the part of major league baseball clubs to serve the country at this vital crisis of its history."⁵

Due to the time necessary for troop training and arms procurement, nearly a year passed between the initiation of the draft in the spring of 1917 and the American military's first participation in substantial combat operations in France. During the 1917 baseball season, the full force of the draft had not caught up with team rosters, and both the American and National leagues were able to finish their 154-game schedules, albeit with a shortfall in attendance due to an economy plagued by fears over the war.

But by the end of 1917, trepidation was rising about the conflict's impact on baseball as more players answered the call to duty, either in uniform or

by gainful employment in war industry. "The fact that four members of the Boston American League team have volunteered in the navy indicates how great will be the loss of professional ball players next season," reported one account in the press. Furthermore, Barney Dreyfuss, president of the Pittsburgh Pirates, warned of a crisis in baseball if exemptions from conscription, which allowed players to remain in the employ of their clubs because of their value as sportsmen and entertainers, were to be eliminated.⁶

In a letter to Tener, Dreyfuss expressed concern that changes to the policy of granting exemptions to certain draftees—which would make it more difficult for ballplayers to avoid military service—would leave most teams with barely a handful of regular players to carry on the business of the national pastime in 1918. "It has been pointed out several times by those most strenuously engaged in war affairs, including I understand President Wilson and Secretary of War Baker, that wholesome sports, and diverting entertainments, should be continued for the benefit of the relaxation and recreation they furnish to those who remain at home," implored the Pirate magnate. "It might be, therefore, that if proper steps were taken, it would be considered that ball players were in a degree worthy of consideration in this respect, as their services are unique and unusual, and cannot be performed properly except by one who has a natural ability for the work and has developed it to the limit of his skill."⁷ Dreyfuss's missive more than implied that any draftee could be molded into a soldier or that a common man could find work in a munitions plant, but a baseball player gifted with a special athletic ability was entitled to remain at his craft because his value to the war cause as an entertainer and morale booster surpassed that of an infantryman or factory worker. Striving for an eighteen-man exemption per team in both circuits, Ban Johnson concurred, citing that "the high standard of the game would be destroyed if the players were indiscriminately drafted for military service."⁸

If baseball tried to skirt the issue of service by its players, proof of the sport's commitment to the war effort and direct support of the troops abroad were evident in other ways. Players and managers purchased war bonds, assisted the Red Cross, and played in charity exhibition contests. Some costs of transmitting baseball news, including accounts of World Series games via cable dispatch to American newspaper bureaus in Paris for distribution to the troops, were borne by the office of the National Commission. A proposal was made to pay Series participants with Liberty Loan bonds rather than cash winnings, and "one percent of the Commission's revenue from the Series will be donated to the Clark Griffith Ball and Bat Fund for supplying paraphernalia of the game to the American Soldiers who are abroad."⁹ White Sox uniforms for the 1917 Fall Classic were outfitted with American flags on both

sleeves, complementing the star-spangled "Sox" logo on the front of the jersey, yet even before the United States became embroiled in hostilities, a 1915 edition of *Baseball Magazine* emphasized the importance of the World Series in helping the country forget about the war if only for a brief time.¹⁰ With America fully involved as of April 1917, baseball's flagship event assumed a heightened importance.

Baseball Magazine also editorialized in June 1917, "Enthusiasm is a fine thing and patriotism a vital necessity. . . . War is a sober business demanding the full co-operations [*sic*] of all classes and types of industry. And war above most things needs the helpful co-operation, not the extermination of athletic sport. . . . No industry has shown a stronger desire to do something of material benefit to the nation than baseball."¹¹ As that publication conflated patriotism and industry, it also noted later that summer the enthusiastic manner in which Braves catcher Hank Gowdy departed for the armed forces as "the first of major league players to join Uncle Sam's army."¹² By March 1918 and with no fewer than seventy-six players in active service—or nearly one-fifth of the total number of participants among all clubs—*Baseball Magazine* staunchly defended the national pastime's contribution of manpower by rhetorically asking, "How many other industries have lost 19% of their working force?"¹³

Offering a different interpretation, however, was the military. The organ of the armed forces, *Stars and Stripes*, told its readers of the players' resistance to serve by sniping at the game's "magnates acclaim [of] the immense value of baseball to the morale of the nation."¹⁴ Yet *Baseball Magazine* editor F. C. Lane stood his ground and countered, "We cannot believe that the administration would wreck the national game, the peculiar institution beloved by the masses in order to supply a few hundred ill equipped young men for industries of which they know little[,] where their work would be on a par with the most unskilled labor in the land."¹⁵ Lane had good reason to pander to the best interest of baseball, since decreasing popularity in the game, which was already manifest in a decline in attendance, also meant fewer copies of his publication would be sold.

In early July 1918, August Herrmann, the president of the National Commission, along with league presidents Johnson and Tener, wrote to the major-league teams instructing them to have players submit an affidavit to their draft boards requesting deferred classification. The first argument proffered by the affidavit—a stock form of which was furnished by the commission—held that a player's compliance with Selective Service Act "will *cause substantial financial loss* not only to himself and to his employer but to the general prosperity of the country," and the second argued that the "affiant further says that he is not skilled in any employment other than the one in which he is

now engaged,” a claim which was to be stricken from affidavits submitted by players who were also farmers.¹⁶ The affidavit cited Henry Groh and his \$800 monthly salary—\$4,800 for a six-month season—as an example of the financial loss that could be suffered, but Groh’s case was hardly representative of the common player. Based on his 1917 performance, in which he ranked near the top of most offensive categories in the National League, Groh was one of the better-paid players in the game, thereby skewing the impression of the financial position of most players as indicated by the affidavit. In June 1918, Herrmann informed Crowder that the average annual salary of drafted players and of those who volunteered was \$2,441.26 and \$2,521.24 respectively, about one-half of what Groh was earning.¹⁷ To put these wages in perspective, workers in manufacturing, mining, construction, transportation, and other various trades earned on average about 53 cents per hour in 1918, and government statistics show that mean *annual* family income at the time was \$1,518.¹⁸ With the average player’s salary at least sixty percent above that of an average household, players subjected themselves to a serious financial loss upon heeding the call to arms.

Not convinced by Herrmann’s argument, Secretary of War Baker at last ruled on July 19 “that baseball is a non-essential occupation,” thereby making players subject to the “work or fight” order which mandated either military service or employment in a war-related industry. In sharp contrast with Lane’s disingenuous assessment of players being poorly fit for duty, Baker stated that “ball players are men of unusual physical ability, dexterity, and alertness, just the type needed to help in the game of war at home or abroad.”¹⁹ President Johnson, in a sudden fit of obsequiousness, announced the suspension of play in the American League, but the circuit’s owners quickly forced Johnson to renounce his edict so that games could continue and allow revenue to flow into each team’s coffers.

Stars and Stripes also came down squarely on the side of the soldiers in a scathing editorial of July 26 in which the paper announced it would no longer print its “sporting page.” Choosing instead to focus on important war news from the front, the paper lambasted players whose evasion of military service had trumped becoming a brother-in-arms and offered this defense of its decision: “There is no space left for the Cobbs [and] the Ruths . . . when the Ryans, the Smiths, . . . and others are charging machine guns and plugging along through shrapnel or grinding out 12-hour details 200 miles in the rear.”²⁰

Insult was added to the injury inflicted by recalcitrant players when it was learned that some players who entered shipbuilding and steel trades did so not for industrial employment but for the purpose of playing on company-sponsored baseball teams. This construction of the “work or fight” order

was hardly what Baker had in mind, and *Baseball Magazine's* Lane properly decried such "slacker contracts" as "a menace to the national game."²¹ Cited by Lane were Joe Jackson of the White Sox and Brooklyn's Al Mamaux, the latter among those excoriated by owner Charles Ebbets, who proclaimed his disdain at the prospect of reemploying players who sought the haven of a shipyard.²²

By the beginning of August, the National Commission was forced to capitulate to Baker's edict, and in spite of a final appeal to Provost Marshal General Crowder for the suspension of the "work or fight" order as applied to baseball, agreement was reached to bring the regular season to a close on Labor Day, September 2. The commission announced that after "wind[ing] up the GREAT NATIONAL SPORT with a *big jollification and . . . appropriate ceremonies*," the traditional Fall Classic was to follow.²³ All players "excepting those on the two teams contesting the World's [*sic*] Series" were to "secur[e] useful employment, so that they lose no time in obeying the letter and spirit of the amended order of Secretary Baker."²⁴ Overcome by a sense of urgency to comply with the order, the Cleveland Indians, who were in second place, two and one-half games behind Boston and one and one-half games ahead of Washington entering the holiday, elected to forego their doubleheader in St. Louis. "The Indians preferred to take a chance on losing second place rather than take a chance with the work or fight order," reported the *Sporting News*. "[Manager Lee] Fohl's workers were more anxious about getting into useful employment than they were worried over the prospect of things coming out that way in baseball."²⁵

The grand finale of the World Series began on September 5—the National Commission claiming no "mercenary" intent for staging the championship—and the Red Sox bested the Cubs four games to two.²⁶ This Fall Classic was nonetheless marred by controversy when players on both teams threatened to strike over a reduction in the amount of shares to be paid. Originally, players on the winning club were to receive \$2,000 each, with \$1,400 awarded to players on the losing club, but the commission, blaming a shortfall in revenue, offered \$1,200 and \$800. When the players bristled at the proposed cutback, the Cubs and Red Sox ownership agreed to make up the difference out of their own pockets, thus averting a work stoppage. It seemed that the players had now outstripped the commission with regard to any mercenary tendencies.

However, damage had already been done to baseball's reputation as a result of the lengthy controversy over "work or fight." Readers of the *Sporting News* learned that attitudes of the soldiers toward the players were both positive and negative, but reporter Thomas Rice said that a letter he received from a relative serving in France indicated that "all of the soldiers with whom he has come in contact have a most profound contempt for the major leaguers who

sought refuge from the draft and violated their contracts by hiding with ship yard teams.”²⁷ Resentment that had been evident in the purging of the sports page by *Stars and Stripes* obviously lingered as teams futilely resisted the attrition of their rosters during 1918.

From a business perspective, baseball’s attempt to shield itself from the eroding effects of conscription made sense, as replacement players unfit for the military or other war service filled the shoes of departed major leaguers. But in the zeitgeist of the day, the more honorable deed would have been for baseball to forego its squabbles with the War Department and voluntarily suspend play earlier than the negotiated date. On an American home front where sauerkraut was relabeled as “liberty cabbage” and the playing of German music was all but banned, baseball’s effort to confer its players with a status of irreplaceable talent necessary to the nation’s morale rang hollow. Johnson recognized the futility of the situation when he opined to Hermann in late October, “It would be the height of folly to attempt a continuance of professional baseball until conditions are in a normal and healthful state.”²⁸

A fortuitous conclusion to the controversy emerged two months after the end of the World Series, the armistice of November 11, 1918, having ushered in an era of peace. The cessation of hostilities in Europe cut short the debate over how patriotic an industry the national pastime had really been. “By next spring the game will be revived in full force,” observed the *Sporting News*, which added, “[I]t will require little effort to reassemble the players who have all been regularly reserved by their respective clubs.”²⁹

Bitterness on the part of some fans notwithstanding, attendance across both leagues in 1919 more than doubled over the war-wracked year of 1918, and the national pastime seemed eagerly poised to enter the postwar era after weathering the ugly storm of its reluctant sacrifice during the conscription controversy.

NOTES

1. David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 81.

2. John Milton Cooper Jr., *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900–1920* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1990), 272.

3. John Tener letter to National League Club Presidents, May 21, 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 42, Folder 12.

4. Ban Johnson, John Tener, and August Herrmann letter to Major League Club Owners, May 25, 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National

Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 80, Folder 15.

5. Johnson, Tener, and Herrmann letter to Major League Club Owners, May 25, 1917.

6. Untitled *Cincinnati Times-Star* article, December 10, 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 112, Folder 26; and Barney Dreyfuss letter to John Tener, November 20, 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 112, Folder 26.

7. Dreyfuss letter to Tener, November 20, 1917.

8. "Players of Quality Are Needed," unknown newspaper, November 22, 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 112, Folder 26.

9. Notice regarding World's Championship Series of 1917, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 91, Folder 3.

10. Kid Gleason's jersey, on display at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, features these adornments.

11. *Baseball Magazine*, 1917, vol. 19, no. 3, 359.

12. "Why I Enlisted," *Baseball Magazine*, 1917, vol. 19, no. 5, 507.

13. *Baseball Magazine*, 1918, vol. 20, no. 2, 389.

14. "Ball Players Say They're Productive," *Stars and Stripes*, June 28, 1918, 2.

15. *Baseball Magazine*, 1918, vol. 20, no. 3, 269.

16. Copy of affidavit, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 113, Folder 4. Emphasis in original.

17. Copy of August Herrmann letter to Provost Marshal General E. H. Crowder, June 15, 1918, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 112, Folder 31.

18. Data sourced from the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, www.bls.gov.

19. "Khaki or Overalls for Ball Players," *Stars and Stripes*, July 26, 1918, 6.

20. "The Sporting Page Goes Out," *Stars and Stripes*, July 26, 1918, 6.

21. "A Rising Menace to the National Game," *Baseball Magazine*, 1918, vol. 21, no. 4, 345.

22. Letter from Charles Ebbets to F. C. Lane, *Baseball Magazine*, 1918, vol. 21, no. 4, 347.

23. National Commission memo to teams, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 113, Folder 3. Emphasis in original.

24. National Commission memo to teams, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 113, Folder 3.

25. “What’s Position in Case of This Kind?”, *Sporting News*, September 5, 1918, 1.

26. National Commission memo to teams, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 113, Folder 3.

27. Thomas Rice, “Soldiers, Though Interested, Are Sore at Ball Players,” *Sporting News*, September 12, 1918, 1.

28. Ban Johnson letter to August Herrmann, October 22, 1918, Papers of August Herrmann, 1887–1938, BAMSS12, National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown NY, Box 112, Folder 27.

29. “Everybody’s an Optimist Now,” *Sporting News*, November 14, 1918, 2.