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ARTICLE

FDR's Green Light Letter: Simple Decision, Complex Consequences

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Abstract

Six weeks after the United States entered World War II, Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt asking if he thought Organized Baseball should continue during the war. FDR responded the next day with his famous Green Light Letter, basically saying yes. Although this simple decision has been amply covered by scholars, its complex consequences have not. During the course of the war, more than a dozen executive agencies were called on to deal with practical aspects of the Green Light letter decision including the Selective Service; the Office of Defense Transportation; the War Mobilization Commission; the Office of War Mobilization; and the departments of war, treasury, and agriculture.

Keywords: Baseball Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis; Major League Baseball during WWII; Green Light Letter; Selective Service; Office of War Mobilization

On the afternoon of December 7, 1941, as word of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor spread slowly, then swiftly across the United States, owners of the sixteen major league baseball teams were making their way to Chicago for their winter meeting, scheduled to begin the next day. The main item on the mostly routine advance agenda was a proposal by St. Louis Browns owner Donald Barnes to move his team, long unsuccessful at both winning games and attracting paying customers, to Los Angeles. Barnes's proposal, which would have required even the league's westernmost clubs to travel about 2,000 miles each way, immediately went from being controversial (no team had changed locations since the formation of Organized Baseball in 1903) to irrelevant and was rejected unanimously (even he voted against it) on December 8, the day the United States declared war on Japan.[1] The owners, led by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, scrapped the rest of the agenda and instead discussed what baseball should do in a time of war. Rattled by events, their only clear decision was to revive Washington Senators owner Clark Griffith's World War I-era "Ball and Bat Fund" to supply baseball equipment to men in uniform at every military post, domestic and, soon, foreign.

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A few of those at the meeting, notably Landis and Griffith, had clear memories of how badly off-track baseball had gone during the Great War (soon relabeled World War I) barely two decades earlier, when the leagues often floundered in responding to the conflict. Owners had sought draft exemptions for players and players had sought cushy jobs playing ball for wartime manufacturers, among other public relations blunders. These memories were shared in Washington by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, a longtime baseball fan who served as assistant secretary of the navy during that war.

As 1941, which drew to a close with Germany's December 11 declaration of war on the United States, led into what would become a prolonged two-theater war, Organized Baseball acted to protect its game (and business). On January 14, 1942, barely five weeks after the United States began mobilizing for war in Europe and the Pacific, Landis wrote to Roosevelt, offering that "if you believe we ought to close down for the duration of the war, we are ready to do so immediately." The president responded the next day with what came to be called the "Green Light Letter." The letter expressed his view that "it would be best for the country to keep baseball going," provided that "players who are of active military or naval age should go, without question, into the services."[2]

"Green Light" is an imperfect metaphor for FDR's letter. Unlike a traffic signal that straightforwardly authorizes drivers to resume their journey, the Green Light letter set in motion a series of complications that subsequently required decisions by about a dozen executive agencies and all three branches of government as well as by Organized Baseball. All of these decisions were made in the president's name. but none landed on his desk. After reviewing the events that led to the writing of the Green Light letter, this essay focuses on the many consequential and often unanticipated developments that followed.

FDR, World War I, and Baseball

Among those for whom baseball and World War I were living memories was FDR. Not a gifted athlete himself, he was a lifelong fan of the game. At the end of the nineteenth century, before Organized Baseball formed and adopted its modern structure of two major leagues and multiple minor leagues, Roosevelt (who admittedly "did not play well") served as manager of Groton's team and player on the school's rump Bum Base Ball Boys club.[3] Starting in 1915, after two years in the New York state senate, he attended multiple Senators games in Washington as assistant naval secretary. So did his boss: Woodrow Wilson, who as a student played center field for Davidson College; as a professor was a raucous umpire-baiting presence at Princeton Tigers baseball games; and as president went to four Senators games in a fifteen-day span in April 1913 (the most of any president) and threw out the opening ball at several, including a 1915 World Series game in Philadelphia.[4] When the United States entered the war on April 6, 1917, Secretary Roosevelt sometimes filled in for President Wilson, appearing at the Senators' home opener on April 20 to throw out the first pitch and join Griffith in a pregame martial display culminating in a flag-raising ceremony.[5]

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Griffith cultivated his relationships with Roosevelt and Wilson, hoping to ingratiate not just his franchise but also Organized Baseball with the administration and thereby prove the *New York Times* wrong when it predicted that an American "declaration of war will sound the death knell of practically all branches of sports in this country."[6] The American and National leagues had only recently—and expensively—fended off a challenge to their duopoly by the Federal League, and nearly every team owner had spent heavily to build new steel-and-concrete stadiums within the past decade.[7] Financially, they had much at stake in keeping baseball going, war or no war.

During spring training in early 1917, with entry into the war fast approaching after Germany lifted restrictions on submarine warfare against American ships, Griffith started the Ball and Bat Fund to supply service members with baseball equipment while they prepared for combat. He asked every fan to donate a quarter to the fund, and Wilson sent him an approving letter along with his own donation.[8] (It helped that General John J. Pershing, describing his soldiers' "proficiency in grenade and bomb throwing," said, "I attribute this to baseball.")[9] In addition, teams persuaded the War Department to supply spring training camps with drill instructors to train players in close-order maneuvers, using baseball bats in lieu of rifles. FDR occasionally joined these sessions when the Senators were in Washington.[10] After Congress declared war just five days before the start of the 1917 season, teams launched additional efforts including free admission for service members, Victory Bond sales, donations to the Red Cross, and collection of the 10% war tax on tickets.

The army took most of a year to expand from 100,000 men to the 4-million-member force it eventually became, sustained by a full complement of newly formed local draft boards, draft lotteries (the first on July 20), training camps, and munitions and other factories. Because few players were drafted in 1917, the season went ahead as scheduled, with Wilson's endorsement of not "stopping or curtailing the baseball schedule."[11] In 1918, however, Organized Baseball shortened the major league season from 154 to 140 games, and all but one minor league either suspended or ended operations.[12] Not knowing how long the war would last, the leagues understood that all their efforts at good public relations, belt-tightening, close ties with the Wilson administration, tangible support for the war effort, and mock training for battle would be for nought if teams could not keep reasonably talented players on the field. The challenge baseball faced was that the Selective Service had made men in their twenties and, soon, their thirties (that is, the vast majority of professional baseball players) eligible to be drafted into service. Frustratingly, theatrical performers but not ballplayers were exempted to provide the home front with "essential" wartime entertainment.[13]

Neither baseball's leaders nor its on-field participants covered themselves with glory in avoiding widespread accusations that ballplayers were, in the parlance of the day, "slackers." More than half of the players were German or Irish Americans, with ancestral homes hostile to the main US ally, Great Britain.[14] American League President Ban Johnson asked that each team be allowed to protect eighteen players from conscription in 1918, only to have this wildly unpopular request undone by his National League counterpart, John Tener, who

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responded, "I would not go one inch to President Wilson or the Secretary of War to ask for special favors."[15] When Boston Red Sox owner Harry Frazee wrote to FDR asking that two of his players be released from the naval reserve, Roosevelt sent a discouragingly equivocal response.[16] A formal appeal from Griffith to Secretary of War Newton A. Baker on behalf of another player was refused on the ground that the military could not spare the services of "ballplayers [who] are men of unusual physical ability, dexterity, and alertness," although Baker did allow the leagues to complete the shortened season as long as the World Series was over by early September.[17] After Head of the Selective Service General Enoch Crowder declared that draft-eligible men must either be "engaged in some useful occupation" (that is, work in an essential sector of the wartime economy) or "be inducted into the military service," multiple players responded to his "work or fight" order by securing no-show jobs playing baseball for a steel company or shipyard in an industrial league.[18] And when, before Game 5 of the 1918 World Series, players on both teams threatened to strike unless they were paid more money, the angry crowd let them know how little support they had.[19] Attendance at major league games declined by about one-fifth in 1917 from prewar 1916 and another one-fifth in 1918.[20]

Having made it, just barely, through the 1918 season, baseball was resigned to the possibility of having to cancel play altogether in 1919. But then, exactly two months after the final game of the World Series on September 11, the war ended, and during the next quarter century, baseball flourished.

The Green Light Letter

From the outset of World War II, Landis was determined not to repeat Organized Baseball's blundering conduct during World War I, when both players and team owners were widely regarded as selfish and greedy. A former federal judge, he had been named baseball commissioner in 1920 with virtually unlimited authority after the Chicago "Black Sox" scandal of 1919 severely undermined public confidence in the game. On January 14, 1942, barely six weeks after Pearl Harbor, Landis used this authority and, acting on his own, sent a handwritten letter to FDR, now the president, that began by noting, "the time is approaching when, in ordinary conditions, our teams would be heading for spring training." Acknowledging that "these are not ordinary times," he then asked if Roosevelt thought "professional baseball should continue to operate," referring not just to "the sixteen major league teams" but also to the "approximately three hundred and twenty minor league teams," which might otherwise be overlooked.[21] Significantly, Landis requested nothing that could be interpreted as special favors for Organized Baseball, refusing then and until his death on November 25, 1944, to repeat the mistakes the leagues and some team owners had made during World War I.

Roosevelt's reply one day later was encouraging. Offered as "solely a personal and not an official point of view," which could have bound the president if circumstances changed, it was otherwise positive in every way. He took note that baseball games last only two hours or so and "can be got for very little cost,"

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thereby providing people working "longer hours and harder than ever before" with "a chance for recreation." FDR concluded by making a better case for continuing baseball than any baseball executive had. "Here is another way of looking at it," he wrote: "if 300 teams use 5,000 or 6,000 players, these players are a definite recreation asset to at least 20,000,000 of their fellow citizens."[22]

Landis was pleased but, presumably, not surprised by FDR's letter. He was aware that Griffith and perhaps others had already been making the case for baseball in informal visits to the White House. He was displeased and surprised that Roosevelt expressed his "hope that night games can be extended because it gives an opportunity to the day shift to see a game occasionally." Griffith was a late but zealous convert to night baseball, which Landis still opposed because he thought it would discourage school kids from coming while encouraging a rough crowd. The Senators owner undoubtedly urged FDR to include this item in his letter.[23] The endorsement was presidential dictum, wholly unresponsive to the question Landis asked. Under the circumstances, however, the commissioner could hardly refuse, even though nearly one-third of major league teams (the Boston Red Sox and Braves, the New York Yankees, the Detroit Tigers, and the Chicago Cubs) still played in unlit stadiums. Meeting on February 3, the owners voted to increase the number of night games each team was allowed to schedule from seven to fourteen, except for Griffith's Senators, who could play twenty-one, more than one-fourth of their home contests.

Commissioner Landis's letter and President Roosevelt's overnight reply were not impulses of the moment. In truth, Landis despised Roosevelt, blaming him for the nation's unreadiness for World War II, and the president despised the commissioner. "Landis wasn't much more welcome at the White House than the Japanese ambassador," said Griffith.[24] Instead, the letters were born of mutual interest. Landis and the team owners had a financial stake in baseball continuing, and Roosevelt knew that the millions of workers logging long hours to build the nation's "arsenal of democracy" would need a diversion from their labors.

Griffith and Democratic politician Robert Hannegan supplied the lubricants that smoothed the transaction between the two otherwise antagonistic leaders. Griffith, who cultivated his relationship with Roosevelt during World War I, renewed it when FDR returned to Washington as president in 1933. Every spring, Griffith called on Roosevelt to give him a season pass to Senators' home games, genial encounters accompanied by friendly small talk by two fans of the game. Between visits, FDR sometimes called Griffith to ask his advice about which way to bet ("Griff, tell me about these pitchers") and threw out the first pitch at every opening day game from 1933 to 1941.[25] Griffith also cultivated a civil relationship with Landis, who for the moment was content to let Griffith represent baseball informally rather than meet with the president himself. As for Hannegan, a sports fan with connections to his hometown St. Louis teams, he was a political confidant of Roosevelt's even before becoming postmaster general in 1943 and Democratic National Committee chair in 1944.[26] Neither Griffith nor Hannegan was so indiscreet as to claim credit for the Green Light letter, but the influence of each is attested by contemporaries and, in Griffith's case, by FDR's endorsement of night baseball, which even reluctant team owners felt compelled to implement.[27]

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As the prime mover behind Organized Baseball's decision to reinstate the Ball and Bat Fund, Griffith persuaded his fellow owners to donate the first $24,000. The fund was even more valued entering this war than the last because post–World War I assessments of military effectiveness had concluded that physically fit men made the best soldiers.[28] Baseball, a game that required little equipment and involved modest risk of injury, functioned well in promoting fitness. The government did not want to appear frivolous in its spending but, understanding baseball's value, appreciated the leagues taking on this expense.[29]

Throughout the war, Griffith continued his annual visits to the White House to drop off the president's season pass. On April 15, 1944, when Roosevelt was off vacationing, he won presidential aide Steve Early's much-appreciated assurance that "the president is pleased to see baseball continuing."[30] The following year, on March 12, Griffith was able to chat with Roosevelt, who told him, "You've got to give me credit for night baseball."[31] FDR repeated the claim the next day in one of his last news conferences, then added, "I consider baseball a very good thing for the population during the war."[32]

The Green Light Letter's Complex Aftermath

Unlike in 1917, when war was declared with no draft yet in place, the Selective Service system was already well established by the time the United States went to war in 1941. It quickly became apparent that FDR's decision to grant baseball a green light to continue did not end but only began his administration's wartime entanglement with Organized Baseball, starting with the draft. Soon a host of other executive agencies became part of the game's effort to continue. Some of them were already established, like the war and treasury departments. Others were newly created for the war, like the War Manpower Commission (WMC) and the Office of Defense Transportation (ODT). On occasion, even Congress and the federal courts became involved.

The War and Navy Departments

FDR's one specific request in the Green Light letter was for major league baseball to authorize more night games so that people working the day shift in war-related occupations could enjoy the relief from drudgery that he expected baseball to provide. That straightforward request was almost immediately undermined by unexpected challenges that arose at the start of the 1942 season in April.

Soon after Germany declared war on the United States, its navy launched Operation Drumbeat, deploying a fleet of U-boats to prey on American merchant vessels as soon as they left eastern ports; one writer called the devastation these submarines wrought the "Atlantic Pearl Harbor."[33] By April 1942, inadequately defended by a navy that was still ramping up from its modest prewar level, forty-two freighters and oil tankers had been sunk, some within sight of land. Even worse, densely populated cities along the seaboard were thought to be vulnerable to German attack by sea and air.

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Acting on behalf of the War Department, the army decided to run tests to determine whether stadium lights shining during night games were visible within range of enemy planes and destroyers. They clearly were in New York City, silhouetting ships and buildings for a distance of thirty miles into the Atlantic for German vessels and two hundred miles for German bombers. So much for night baseball at the Brooklyn Dodgers' Ebbets Field and the New York Giants' Polo Grounds (Yankee Stadium had no lights). New York's police commissioner ordered that none of the teams' fourteen scheduled night games go ahead as planned.[34] The Dodgers and Giants soon improvised, scheduling late-afternoon twilight games that had to end by nightfall. From these teams' success attracting early-rising day shift workers and their children on school nights, other teams began offering twilight games and, in some cases, mid-morning contests, which had the added benefit of allowing night-shift workers to attend.

The night-game lights problem was solved by October 1943, when the navy announced that it was now sufficiently robust to protect the east coast and western Atlantic. The blackouts ended and night baseball resumed, even expanded, during the 1944 season. After the war, seeing how many fans preferred night games, the leagues lifted all limits on them except on Sundays and holidays.

Selective Service

A problem less easily solved involved Organized Baseball's interactions with the Selective Service. It was further complicated when the draft status of ballplayers became entangled with the work of other bureaucratic agencies, notably the WMC and the Office of War Mobilization (OWM).

Baseball faced the same challenge during World War II as it had during World War I: how to keep the game going when nearly everyone in the pool of men who played it overlapped with the pool of men best suited to fight a war: the young, strong, keen-eyed, and athletic. When, in response to the rapid fall of France to the Nazis in spring 1940, FDR sought the creation of the nation's first peacetime draft, Congress complied by passing the Selective Training and Service Act in September. The act required all men age twenty-one to thirty-six to register for possible conscription into service for one year. Organized Baseball, only modestly affected by the draft during the 1940 season, became worried about 1941. In contrast to his usual surefootedness in dealing with Roosevelt, Griffith wrote a letter requesting that no more than one player from each team be drafted until the end of the season, only to receive a curt rejection from the president's secretary, General Edwin Watson.[35] That refusal, combined with relentless German and Japanese advances in 1941, sent Roosevelt back to Congress in August to extend the draftees' obligation for another eighteen months. Immediately after Pearl Harbor, the time limit on military service was removed entirely and the draft age was lowered to eighteen and raised to thirty-eight.

Although draft registration for young men was universal, conscription into actual service was selective and often varied from one local draft board to another. Working in an essential sector of the wartime economy that, as in 1917, included show business but not baseball, allowed one to remain out of uniform. For a time marriage, then marriage combined with fatherhood or being

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the sole support of an aging parent, might earn one a 3-A exemption based on the hardship to dependents that conscription would cause. But when the two leading stars of the 1941 season, Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams, began playing in 1942 while classified as 3-A, fan pressure led them to enlist.[36] Those classified as 4-F, unfit for service, although unable to do anything about it (they didn't classify themselves), came in for particular scorn throughout the war. In truth, conditions such as epilepsy, ulcers, or a punctured eardrum allowed one to play baseball in hospital-rich cities but not to serve long stretches on a battlefield. Over time, it became harder to gain or even keep an exemption, as the capacity of the army and navy to train, equip, and deploy men for battle increased from year to year, eventually exceeding twelve million from a standing start of about 330,000 in 1940 that ranked the United States seventeenth among nations, barely ahead of Bulgaria. Still, the major leagues managed to field solid teams in 1942. Only one club, the Cincinnati Reds, lost as many as two starting players to the draft that year.

By early 1943, the army and navy were almost fully mobilized, dramatically increasing the need for soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen. More than two hundred major league ballplayers in 1942 were in uniform in 1943. Team owners seriously considered canceling the season, some even hoping the government would do so because to cancel it on their own would nullify their contracts with players, thereby making them free agents when the game resumed.[37]

Play continued in 1943 and beyond but with unusual consequences, as fewer and fewer major-league-caliber athletes remained available. For a time the Reds' pitching staff included a fifteen-year-old and two men in their mid-forties.[38] The heretofore hapless Browns, who had always skimped on talent as a way of staying solvent, won the 1944 American League pennant with a 4-F-dominated roster.[39] Griffith signed Latin American players, who as foreign nationals could not be drafted but, because they were not Black, were allowed by Organized Baseball to play.[40] And of the 473 major league and more than four thousand minor league ballplayers who served by war's end, many were conscripted by their commanding officers to play for their base's team in interservice competitions.[41] Many but not all: some players, including Bob Feller, insisted on being sent into combat. Two major leaguers and 43 minor leaguers died during the war, and others were severely wounded.[42]

War Manpower Commission

Perhaps to a fault, FDR fostered competition among his advisers, including the heads of the various wartime agencies he created. "There is something to be said for having a little conflict between agencies," he said. Within the administration, "a little rivalry ... keeps everybody going to provide that he is better than the next man."[43] By statute, the Selective Service was charged to oversee the registration and drafting of men into uniform. But, always reluctant to lodge complete confidence in any individual or agency, Roosevelt appointed new people to head a long sequence of new agencies, knowing that their responsibilities would overlap and cause interagency and interpersonal conflicts.

Two wartime agencies—the WMC and the OWM—often found themselves in each other's business and, occasionally, in the business of the Selective Service.

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Each was headed by a leader of prominence, accomplishment, and high self-regard: Former Indiana governor Paul V. McNutt as WMC director; General Lewis B. Hershey as director of the Selective Service;; and James F. Byrnes, a former senator from South Carolina and, until joining the administration in October 1942 to head the new Office of Economic Stabilization, a Roosevelt appointee to the Supreme Court. Byrnes became OWM director eight months later, in May 1943.

Conflicts born of bureaucratic turfmanship were often compounded by clashes of ego. McNutt's ambitions for higher office sometimes conflicted with Roosevelt's. Partly to co-opt him, the president created the WMC in April 1942 and appointed McNutt to chair it. The commission's broad charter was to balance the manpower needs of agriculture, industry, and the military so that all vital sectors were adequately staffed, a task much greater than the authority McNutt was given to fulfill it.[44] Indeed, a further grant of jurisdiction, over Hershey's Selective Service in December 1942, revealed just how much more McNutt bit off than he could chew. The Selective Service proved less responsive than resistant to his direction and regained its independence one year later after Hershey made clear to McNutt that he "will not transmit any order from you" to local draft boards.[45] McNutt further blundered by seeking to become FDR's vice-presidential running mate at the 1944 Democratic National Convention, despite the president's clear lack of encouragement.[46]

The WMC director's first major interaction with baseball came in 1943, when he issued a list of 138 essential war-related civilian occupations that did not include professional athletes but did allow ballplayers who held essential jobs in the late fall and winter to rejoin their teams in the spring. His second major interaction came in advance of the 1945 season, when he issued the latest in a series of de facto work-or-fight orders. Taken at face value, the orders would have placed the season in jeopardy by forcing many of the remaining players to seek year-round employment in an essential job, military or otherwise. But FDR, encouraged by leading Washington figures such as Senator Albert "Happy" Chandler of Kentucky and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, once again put McNutt in his place, albeit indirectly. Asked at a January 2, 1945, press conference if he "still felt [baseball] could continue," the president answered with the same green light as when Landis posed the question in January 1942: "I still am all in favor of baseball," consistent with "the building up of the army."[47]

Office of War Mobilization

Byrnes's jurisdiction and authority as director of the Office of War Mobilization (OWM) were far-reaching, which is why Roosevelt badly wanted him in this role. Much as FDR valued competition among his advisers, he had reached his limit by 1943. With the fighting in the European and Pacific theaters commanding more of his attention, he wanted someone handling the home front who had enough stature to "smooth [interagency] disputes over or, failing that, destroy one or both miscreants."[48] No one doubted that Byrnes fit the bill.

Baseball came under Byrnes's jaundiced gaze in late 1944, after Landis died but before a new commissioner was appointed. While heading the economic stabilization office, Byrnes had already frozen all baseball salaries. This decision bred

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resentment among players because, even as their expenses rose, they couldn't share in the profitability that all but three of the sixteen major league teams enjoyed during the war, in part because replacement players were paid less than the drafted players they replaced.[49] Now at OWM, Byrnes turned his attention to the players' employment status, taking umbrage that more than half of current major league athletes were classified as 4-F—unfit to fight yet fit to play ball. On December 9, he urged Hershey to reconsider the draft status of 4-F professional athletes who nonetheless "prove to thousands by their great physical feats upon the football or baseball field that they are physically fit and as able to perform military service as are the 11 million men in uniform."[50]

Six days later Hershey, who knew that defying McNutt was one thing but defying Byrnes another, directed the nation's nearly 6,500 local daft boards to review the cases of all men classified as unfit for service. "The result," according to historian William Mead, "was a draft policy that quite openly discriminated against professional athletes" because local boards overzealously reclassified players as fit for duty who had health issues that could be managed at home but not in combat.[51] Only the army's declining need for new conscripts after major victories on the battlefield in early 1945 allowed most players to remain with their teams. Reduced draft calls and increased discharges cleared the way for baseball to proceed in April. With victory secured in Europe and within sight in the Pacific, Byrnes resigned his OWM directorship to become secretary of state in July.

Office of Defense Transportation

Major league baseball from 1903 until well after World War II was a sixteen-team organization, geographically concentrated in the Northeast and Midwest. The St. Louis Browns and Cardinals were baseball's westernmost as well as southernmost franchises. Still, all teams traveled, mostly by rail, for half of their games and, in the early months of the year, customarily went south to Florida or west to California for spring training. Nothing in Roosevelt's Green Light letter said anything about travel. But, in advance of the 1943 season, the ODT became concerned about the strains that team travel placed on the railroads' ability to move troops and civilian defense personnel from base to base.

On November 30, 1942, ODT director Joseph Eastman wrote to Landis and the presidents of the American and National Leagues urging baseball to "give careful consideration to the problem of how your basic travel can be met without a waste in space or mileage."[52] When the team owners gathered in December, they agreed to reduce from three to four the number of trips teams made between the four East Coast cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Washington and the six Midwestern cities of Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Detroit, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis.

Left awkwardly hanging after the meeting was Eastman's specific recommendation that each team make its "selection of a training site as near as possible to the permanent headquarters of the team."[53] Landis filled the void in January 1943. After consulting with Eastman, he sent a letter to team owners making clear that they could "forget about relocating anywhere in the Southeast."[54] He

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and Eastman agreed on what came to be called the "Eastman-Landis line" for spring training, forbidding sites south of the Ohio and Potomac rivers or, with exceptions for the Cardinals and Browns in Missouri, west of the Mississippi River. The owners accepted the plan, affirming Landis's statement that "nobody needs to enter any orders on us" and securing Eastman's praise of "baseball's cooperation ... as a pattern for the nation."[55] Spring training at locations such as Bear Mountain, New York; Medford, Massachusetts; and French Lick, Indiana, was the farthest thing from spring-like, but the constraints on rail travel—self-imposed by Landis for fear of being draconially imposed by Eastman or J. Monroe Johnson, his successor as ODT Director—not only continued but intensified. For example, the priority given to the many discharged veterans traveling home by train in 1945 led ODT to ask baseball to reduce its rail travel by an additional 25%, leading to the cancellation of the All Star game, among other adjustments.[56]

The ODT's charter, granted by FDR in the December 18, 1941, executive order that created it, extended to "motor" as well as rail transportation. The Negro National League and Negro American League were especially limited by the former. Each white major league team played its games in large cities, which meant that rail transportation was nearly the only mode of travel they needed to go from one place to the next. In contrast, Negro league teams played weekend games in cities (often in major league stadiums that they rented for the purpose at great expense) but barnstormed to play in smaller towns in between.[57] Because these towns were less well served by passenger rail, teams drove from place to place in buses. When, on January 4, 1942, Office of Price Administration Director Leon Henderson ordered that gasoline be severely rationed starting in May (caused less by scarcity of oil than of rubber for tires), these teams suffered difficulties traveling that removed a significant source of revenue. In a March 1943 meeting with Eastman, the Negro league presidents asked for permission to buy more gas for their teams' buses but to no avail. Eastman's unhelpful advice was simply to "utiliz[e] existing transportation."[58]

Despite this refusal and the resulting loss of revenue from midweek games, the Negro leagues thrived during World War II. The reduction of barnstorming income was more than made up by increased attendance at weekend games in the cities, which benefited from the enormous northward migration of southern Blacks to work in factories manufacturing the weapons of war.[59] With money in their pockets, ticket-buying Black fans (and some whites) swelled the stands at Negro league contests. Because public transportation was so efficient within major league cities, urban dwellers did not have to use scarce gasoline to drive to games.

Foolishly, major league teams that were increasingly bereft of on-field talent as the war continued refused to sign Black players. In general, they feared losing more white fans than gaining Black fans and, specifically, did not want to jeopardize the revenue they received when Negro league teams rented their stadiums.[60] Only Landis's succession as commissioner by the pro-integration Senator Chandler helped clear the way for Branch Rickey and the Brooklyn Dodgers to recruit Jackie Robinson over the opposition of every other major league team owner.[61] Robinson's signing was arranged on August 28, 1945, five days before the war officially ended. It was announced two months later.[62]

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The ODT policies making travel difficult and expensive also affected the makeup of the newly formed All American Girls Professional Baseball League. Minor league baseball suffered mightily from the loss of its young, mostly unmarried (or married without children) players to the draft. Of the forty-one minor leagues in 1941, only ten remained in 1943. Chicago Cubs owner Phil Wrigley saw an opening in 1942 for a women's professional league to partially fill the gap; its players, like all women, were eligible to serve but exempt from conscription. For ease of travel, the league's teams were located close together: Racine and Kenosha, Wisconsin; Grand Rapids, Michigan; Fort Wayne and South Bend, Indiana; and Rockford, Illinois. The league did fairly well in these small cities, where traditional sports competition had become scarce, and lasted for nearly a decade after the war.[63]

Congress, the Justice Department, and the Courts

Anticipating the end of the war, in 1944 Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the GI Bill, to assure returning veterans that they could regain their pre-war civilian jobs for at least one year, with no reduction in pay. The new law charged the Department of Justice to enforce this right. It also placed baseball in an awkward position. Clearly some number of former players returning from the war would no longer be able, after years away from the game, to compete at their previous high level.

Led by Commissioner Chandler, the major leagues interpreted the GI Bill to mean that former team members were only entitled to a thirty-day training period and two weeks of salary. This worked well for the roughly three hundred returning major leaguers who made the cut and were added to their teams' 1946 rosters.[64] Others, however, were relegated to a minor league club or released from Organized Baseball entirely. Among those who protested that their rights under the GI Bill were violated when their former teams did not keep them was Bob Harris, a Philadelphia Athletic until he was drafted in 1942. When Chandler gave Harris and others like him no satisfaction, he filed a complaint with the US Attorney's office in Philadelphia, which helped him reach a financial settlement with the club.[65]

Others refused to settle. None were forced back onto their old teams, but at least one, Al Niemac, won at trial in federal district court and received his full salary. Others, like Steve Sundra, sued and lost, the federal judge in his case, unlike the judge in Niemac's, ruled that baseball is not like other businesses and therefore not covered by the GI Bill's protections. In a further complication, the minor league team in Jackson, Mississippi, asked the Veterans Administration to assume its payroll under a provision of the GI Bill that charged the VA to pay veterans to participate in training programs. The VA declined on the grounds that even after training, there was no "reasonable assurance" that Jackson's returning players would be talented enough to compete in a professional league.[66]

Other Federal Agencies

At various times, baseball came briefly into contact with other federal agencies on war-related matters. In December 1942, the Office of War Information threw a

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scare into Organized Baseball by warning that wartime necessity would probably drain the game of all its players by midseason the following year.[67] In 1943, at least one team owner felt compelled to go to Washington to resist (successfully, as it turned out) an effort—supported by the Agriculture Department—to ban the sale of prepared foods except at restaurants, which would have cut severely into concession sales at ballparks and other sports venues.[68] That same year, the major leagues embraced a Treasury Department suggestion that they promote war bond sales by allowing local businesses to sponsor individual players, fantasy-league-style. This generated nearly $124 million in bond sales.[69]

The rubber shortage that caused gasoline to be rationed during the war, born of the Japanese occupation of the rubber-producing Dutch East Indies, led FDR to create the Rubber Reserve Company to engineer a steep increase in the production of synthetic rubber by fostering cooperation between Firestone, Goodyear, and other manufacturers. The initial unavailability of rubber, natural or synthetic, affected the supply of baseballs, which had rubber cores. In 1943, the A.G. Spalding company, the leagues' supplier, replaced rubber with balata extracted from trees native to Latin America. Balata, although a rubbery substance, had little of rubber's elasticity. Balata balls were notoriously dead—it hurt batters' hands to hit them—but the problem was solved when the availability of synthetic rubber—spurred by the Rubber Reserve Company—rose to meet the demand.[70] Hitting revived in 1944.

Other Sports

Unlike baseball, other professional sports received no presidential attention even though some (including bowling) asked FDR for their own Green Light-style letters and were simply ignored. As popular as football, horse racing, boxing, golf, and tennis were, none enjoyed baseball's cultural centrality at the time, especially as spectator sports. People continued to play golf recreationally, for example, but until victory in Europe opened the door for the PGA tournament to resume in July 1945, golf's majors were suspended. Nor, despite their efforts, did other sports have baseball's patriotic luster. For the first time, the National Anthem became a pregame fixture during the war, and teams rewarded fans with free admission if they brought scrap metal, rubber, even kitchen fat to the ballpark.[71] War bond sales, a revived Ball and Bat Fund for military units, and charity games whose proceeds went to the relief of service members' families were among the well-publicized ways baseball demonstrated its support for the troops.[72]

Most of the other professional sports continued, at least for a time, as did college sports if teams competed locally and could find enough athletes to fill their rosters. (West Point and the Naval Academy, with full complements of male students, thrived in the reduced competitive college sports environment of the war.)[73] In contrast, horse racing, a sport whose manpower requirements were modest and often satisfied by jockeys younger and trainers older than draft age, was halted by the government in early 1945 as "a suspected culprit in war plant absenteeism."[74] (Parimutuel betting was legal only at the tracks.) Boxing was severely curtailed by the scarcity of fighters who, as participants in a pure

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combat sport, had an especially hard time convincing local draft boards that they would not thrive on the battlefield.

Among professional sports leagues, the National Football League did best, although not without a struggle. Like boxers, most football players had a demonstrated suitability for combat. The Brooklyn Dodgers football team went out of business, the Cleveland Rams suspended operations, and the Pittsburgh Steelers and Philadelphia Eagles merged for a couple of years (soon succeeded, when the Eagles resumed independent operations, by a combined Steelers and Chicago Cardinals squad). Other teams coped by signing former professional players who were too old to be drafted. The league reduced rosters and shortened its schedule.[75]

In the end, pro football did well enough for the NFL to survive and for investors to pour money into the formation of a new league, the All America Football Conference, which nonetheless was unable to launch until fall 1946, a year after the war ended.[76] Despite its lack of the privileged status that FDR afforded baseball, pro football had two things going for it that baseball lacked. First, football was played on Sunday, enabling a good many players to work in a wartime industry during the week and still participate in home games and even nearby away contests. Second, the Japanese surrender in late summer 1945 cleared the way for the NFL to play a complete season that fall even as baseball had to play most of its games before the war ended.

Conclusion

In matters of public policy, simple decisions that have complex and largely unanticipated consequences are often marked by failure. This was not the case with President's Roosevelt's letter to Commissioner Landis offering Organized Baseball a green light to continue during World War II. FDR's goal for baseball was that it provide much-needed recreation for civilians working in war-related jobs without exempting healthy players from the draft that all young men faced. For the duration of the war, baseball did provide recreation for many, facilitated by FDR's additional request that more games be played at night so day-shift workers could attend. Nearly five hundred major league players—and more than four thousand from the minor leagues—served in uniform, a very large majority of those who were found fit for service by their local draft board. Baseball also roused patriotism among fans by adding the National Anthem and granting free admission to service members as well as to civilians who donated war-related materials or bought war bonds. The sport adapted well to the difficulties of travel that the war imposed, sacrificing spring training in warm locations and reducing its intercity rail and bus requirements. The minor leagues, whose rosters were filled with young, unmarried, childless—that is, draft-eligible—men, suffered, only to revive as soon as the war ended, rising from their wartime low of ten leagues to forty-three in 1946, a greater number than before the war. In the meantime, women played professional baseball and the Negro Leagues prospered.

In addition to the hard work of multiple federal agencies and the cooperation of Landis, Griffith, and the other team owners, wartime baseball was sustained by

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public support. Polls taken at home and abroad found that civilians and soldiers wanted baseball to continue.[77] Wherever on the globe they might be, Americans were connected across the oceans by support for their teams and interest in the game. Realizing this, the military supplied troops overseas with highlights films and, eventually, live broadcasts of the World Series. The leagues supplied them with baseball equipment to help fill the empty hours.

Baseball's wartime continuation was touch and go at times. For a while, it seemed that the 1943 and 1945 seasons might have to be canceled for lack of credible players. But FDR never flagged in his support for the game, even as he serenely rose above all the intragovernmental complications that occurred beneath his gaze. In 1945, just weeks before his death, Roosevelt bragged to Griffith about the success of night baseball and told a press conference that he was glad baseball continued to be played while contributing eligible men to the war. He stood by the Green Light letter to the end, and it never turned red.

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