

Thomas W. Zeiler, *Ambassadors in Pinstripes: The Spalding World Baseball Tour and the Birth of the American Empire*

by Michael L. Krenn

In 1888–1889, baseball mogul Albert Spalding carried out what was, for its time, an audacious undertaking: sending two teams of American baseball players literally around the world. In the space of six months, the teams played exhibition games in New Zealand, Australia, Hawaii, Ceylon, Egypt, France, Italy, England, Scotland, and Ireland. The travails and triumphs of the arduous journey are covered with wit and verve in this brief and entertaining book. The exploits of the players, both on and off the field, are covered in some detail. Aside from the legendary “Cap” Anson, most of the names will resonate only with the most avid baseball fan, but Zeiler brings all of them to life (warts and all).

Had Zeiler done nothing more than resurrect this little-remembered nugget of Gilded Age history, the story would be of little interest to anyone beyond sports zealots and those scholars who might find the colorful characters and tales fodder for the next video or manuscript history of baseball. However, in less than two hundred pages the author accomplishes a great deal more. Using Spalding’s baseball tour as an interesting backdrop, Zeiler examines the growth of American industrial capitalism and the resultant outward surge of the nation’s economic (and cultural, racial, and political) power overseas. In short, he uses the story of the baseball tour as a vehicle for illuminating America’s rise to empire; or, as Zeiler prefers, the “process of globalization” (xii).

The author is careful to note, however, that he is *not* interested in writing another history of the late nineteenth-century American empire, but instead wishes to focus on “the ideas and expressions behind the formation of empire.” Coming a decade before the

Spanish-American War, Spalding's baseball tour "gave a sense of the exceptionalism of the United States and the hope of elites of the future greatness, and, thus, imperial power, of the country" (xiii). As Zeiler freely admits, the globetrotting baseball players "might be viewed as quite odd representatives of budding imperial notions," but he casts them as living examples of "globalization"—agents, if you will, of America's growing claims to worldwide economic, political, and cultural power (ix).

Zeiler adopts a unique and effective approach to telling his story. While following a rough chronological organization, he uses each individual chapter as a means to describe an aspect of globalization. Chapter one looks at the simultaneous growth of Chicago as an entrepreneurial center and Albert Spalding's steady climb to dominate both the sport of baseball (as cultural entertainment) and the business side of the sport (particularly sporting equipment). The following chapter introduces us to the impact of transportation on the process of globalization by taking us along on the long trek by railroad from Chicago to the baseball players' point of departure for their overseas adventure, San Francisco. Chapter three focuses on the issue of race as it concerned the baseball tour. According to Zeiler, the players carried with them "notions of superiority"; indeed, he argues, they "traveled in the context of race, a context that shaped their views of and experiences with the nonwhite domestic and foreign cultures to which they were exposed" (75-76). However, in the next chapter Zeiler indicates that the players were abruptly disabused of their notions of superiority when they arrived in Europe. The English, French, and Italians, it turned out, were seasoned pros both in terms of exuding ideas of national greatness and building empires. As he wryly notes, "The Old World might teach the Americans a thing or two about culture, customs, and humility, and

ultimately reveal the United States to be an empire in waiting rather than a nation that had already come of age in the world arena” (121). As the final chapter demonstrates, however, the plucky Americans quickly shook off the cool reception from the Europeans. Upon their return to the United States they and their supporters proclaimed that the baseball tour was not a mere suggestion of what might be, but a clear announcement that the globalization of American culture and capitalism was complete and that the North American giant was ready to accept world leadership there and then.

For the remainder of this rather brief essay, I would like to focus on the questions raised by Zeiler’s use of “globalization” as the central theme of his book, as well as the role of culture as an agent in that process. The term “globalization” has been growing in popularity during the past two or three decades and is used to describe any number of things. An internet search for “globalization” produces more than 1,650,000 sites, most of them dealing with definitions of the word. When I began this essay there were 41,836 books on Amazon.com that featured “globalization,” including volumes that are basically “globalization for idiots” (the stamp of approval for college students). By the time this essay was completed there were 41,859 books. As one might imagine, this burgeoning mass of information results in a veritable cacophony of interpretations of what globalization is and what impact it has on the world and its people. These range from the rather benign descriptions offered up by the World Bank (“the growing integration of economies and societies around the world”) and the International Monetary Fund (“an extension beyond national borders of the same market forces that have operated for centuries at all levels of human economic activity—village markets, urban industries, or financial centers”), to studies that portray globalization as either the salvation of the

underdeveloped world or as another mask for devastating capitalistic exploitation of many of the nations of Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.<sup>1</sup>

Zeiler's definition of this key term is in some ways a reflection of this ongoing, multi-faceted debate. It is somewhat indefinite. He notes that the process "hinged on modernization through industrialization" and further suggests that it is an immutable, nearly inevitable force—"a never-ending cycle of innovation, profit, sacrifice, and change" (xii). By the late 1800s it was already a centuries-old phenomenon, with technology, industrialization, capitalism, and increasingly efficient modes of transportation washing over national boundaries, linking developed, underdeveloped, and underdeveloped nations together in transnational markets of goods, ideologies, and cultural manifestations. In American hands, the process took on a decidedly nationalistic tint; globalization became merely the precursor to "Americanization" on a global scale. Yet all of this leaves the specific parameters of globalization somewhat hazy and extremely malleable. Zeiler's constant reference to the term suggests that scholars, while perhaps disagreeing on the impacts of globalization, are in general agreement on its meaning. That, however, is hardly the case. As Imre Szeman notes, it has become a "ubiquitous term in a wide-range of academic and popular discourses" and is used to describe a dizzying array of circumstances. "For this very reason, globalization is a concept that is already in danger of becoming simply a short-lived buzzword of the age." Even the World Bank, after dedicating an entire study to an understanding of globalization, finally had to admit that "amazingly for such an extensively used term as globalization, **there does not appear to be any precise, widely agreed definition.** Indeed the breadth of meanings attached to it seems to be increasing rather than

narrowing over time, taking on cultural, political and other connotations in addition to the economic.”<sup>2</sup>

Zeiler himself, of course, is interested in increasing that “breadth of meaning” to include the cultural manifestations of globalization. In fact, this is one of the very valuable contributions of the book. Most historians of U.S. foreign relations are by now well aware of the rapidly growing number of studies of “cultural diplomacy.” Almost without fail, however, these works focus on the post–World War II period and the “culture wars” between the United States and the Soviet Union. These twentieth-century battles of national cultures, featuring opposing armies of ballet dancers, actors, singers, writers, and artists, have certainly widened the lens through which the Cold War is viewed and expanded our understanding of the nearly all-encompassing nature of that conflict. Zeiler takes us back to an earlier (and supposedly more innocent) time when thoughts of “cultural diplomacy” were, like the American empire, just taking shape. As he consistently reminds us, Spalding and his cohorts in the sporting industry saw the baseball tour as a way to spread American ideals of manliness, progress, and national superiority around the globe.

Despite the 1880s setting, however, Zeiler’s study serves to illuminate some of the same crucial issues concerning cultural diplomacy that confront his colleagues working on later periods of U.S. diplomatic history. One is the relationship between governmental and non-governmental players in the carrying out of international presentations of American culture. On this subject Zeiler raises some interesting questions. In the Cold War historiography of cultural diplomacy, it is very often the government that seems to be the motivating agent. Indeed, some scholars have suggested

that private actors—cultural organizations or groups or individuals involved in the arts—were mere puppets used by the government for its own propaganda purposes. In Zeiler's book, however, the government is almost completely absent from the picture. Aside from an extremely awkward meeting between the returning baseball tourists and President Benjamin Harrison, U.S. officials make only brief and rare appearances during the course of the study. There are a few diplomatic receptions here and there along the path of the baseball teams, but by and large it is the planning, initiative, and financial support provide by Spalding and his associates that drive the endeavor. Of course, baseball players are hardly the Bolshoi Ballet or the touring company of "Porgy and Bess," but this does strongly suggest that non-governmental cultural agents were moving far ahead of the government. Further investigation of early attempts at cultural exchange are needed, but if private actors were indeed controlling cultural exchanges, then perhaps it partially explains the reluctance of later actors to cede an immense degree of control over such exchanges and their guarded wariness when approached by the U.S. government after World War II.

Of course, this all raises the question of whether efforts such as the baseball tour can fairly be called cultural diplomacy at all. With the government a negligible presence in the proceedings, one is forced to more carefully consider the motivations of private citizens such as Spalding. Yes, he liberally peppered his speeches and letters with chest-thumping pronouncements of U.S. supremacy and did his best to portray the tour as nothing less than an extension of American power and prestige to foreign lands. When all was said and done, however, the question remains: did patriotism or profit really drive Spalding? Was the tour merely an extended business junket, with Spalding's desire

to spread baseball nothing more than an effort to create more demand for bats, balls, and gloves (all of which he produced)? Zeiler would argue that what appear to be Spalding's individual initiatives were, in fact, manifestations of the on-going process of globalization. Perhaps, but if not, then one of the main criticisms of studies of cultural diplomacy rears its ugly head: that the scholar simply reads too much into episodes that were merely entertaining diversions rather than important barometers of America's rise to power.

And, as with all studies of cultural diplomacy, the issue of impact on the foreign audience comes to the fore. If the baseball tour was explicitly designed to spread admiration and respect for—and perhaps mimicry of—American ideals, then one can only conclude from Zeiler's study that it failed rather miserably. Citing the large crowds that viewed the often sloppily played games can be deceiving. Many in the audience were perhaps drawn by no greater forces than boredom, a desire for novel entertainments, or mere idle curiosity. Certainly nothing Zeiler describes suggests that the games had more than a momentary impact on the host nations. By and large, the European audiences seemed genuinely uninterested, offering little more than polite applause and smiles. As an agent of "globalization," therefore, did the baseball tour have an important or lasting impact on the nations visited? Of course, in a world where one of the highest-paid baseball players in history is Japanese, perhaps it all just took a few decades to sink in.

None of these questions or criticisms is meant to diminish the importance of this book. Indeed, it is a testament to Zeiler that he is able to pack so many significant issues and questions into a less-than-200-page study of a little-known event in the history of

sports in the United States. By pushing the topics of globalization and cultural diplomacy back to the late nineteenth century, he is alerting us to the need for some critical rethinking about the means and ends of America's rise to empire.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the World Bank definition, see <http://www.worldbank.org/globalization>; for the IMF, go to <http://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/ib/2000/041200.htm#II>. For a brief sampling of books that argue the pros and/or cons of globalization, see Daniel Cohen, *Globalization and Its Enemies* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Dani Rodrik, *Has Globalization Gone Too Far?* (Washington, DC: Institute for International Economics, 1997); Ankie Hoogvelt, *Globalization and the Post-Colonial World: The New Political Economy of Development*, 2d ed. (Baltimore, 2001); and Michel Chossudovsky, *The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order* (Pincourt, Quebec: Global Research, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Imre Szeman, "Globalization," in John Hawley, ed., *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies* (Westport, CT, 2001), 209; for the World Bank report see <http://www1.worldbank.org/economicpolicy/globalization/documents/AssessingGlobalizationP1.pdf> (bold in original).