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## Baseball Diplomacy: America's Favorite Pastime as a Tool of Soft Power in Cuba and the Dominican Republic

Michael Alexander Kurlan  
*Bard College*

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Baseball Diplomacy: America's Favorite Pastime as a Tool of Soft Power in Cuba and the  
Dominican Republic

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
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by  
Michael Kurlan

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## Introduction

Baseball, at its simplest, is a game played by two teams each of which consist of nine players. With very little equipment—only a ball, a bat, and gloves—the game takes place on a field with four bases set out in the shape of a diamond, and includes nine innings, where one team bats until three outs are made (Holtzman, et. al., 2023, 1). This seemingly straightforward sport has long been regarded as “America’s Favorite Pastime,” and contains great symbolic and nostalgic meaning in American culture. While baseball is not *the most* popular American sport, it remains among the most popular, and was first played in 1839 in Cooperstown, New York (Holtzman, et. al., 2023 1). While it began as an exclusively American sport, over the past century and a half, it has traveled around the world, becoming more popular in many other countries than it is even at home in the United States (US).

In this project, I argue that the proliferation of baseball to other countries, aided by the rise of globalization, is a diplomatic strategy and should therefore be recognized as a tool of soft power for American diplomacy. I look to Cuba and the Dominican Republic (DR) as two exemplary cases to study due to the extreme popularity of baseball in both states. Cuba and the DR make for an interesting pair to study side by side, as they share many similarities: both are island nations in the Caribbean with histories of Spanish colonization, both share baseball as the most popular spectator sport, both have nearly equally sized populations: Cuba at 11.21 million, and the DR at 11.23 million people, as of 2022 (World Bank Open Data, 2024). Despite these similarities, Cuba and the DR have very different histories of political, social, and economic development; Cuba has a long history of communist leadership, while the DR has maintained a

democratic government since the mid 20th century. It is for these key similarities and differences that make them excellent cases to examine.

In Chapter 1, I first examine the history of baseball within the United States. Then, I examine key concepts such as globalization, soft power, and several conceptions of diplomacy, carving out a working definition and theory of “baseball diplomacy” as a sub-type of public diplomacy. While the term “baseball diplomacy” has been used to describe the case of American-Cuban relations, which I examine in Chapter 2, I believe that it should be more widely applicable to other cases, including the DR. In Chapter 3, I study the historical development of the US and the DR’s relationship, paying careful attention to the central importance of baseball. I argue that, unlike Cuba, baseball diplomacy has been incredibly successful in the DR, largely due to implications of the Cuban embargo and the capitalist economic system in the DR. In both of these cases, while distinct, the US has used baseball as a means of building connection, improving its image, and exerting influence over other states’ cultures and political decisions. In the Conclusion, I summarize the details of my findings and offer a proposal for future studies that can help address gaps in the literature.



## Chapter 1: A Theory of Baseball Diplomacy

### Introduction

In this chapter, I lay the theoretical groundwork upon which my case studies rest—that baseball is a form of soft power and a powerful diplomatic tool for American use, though not the only tool at its disposal—before I examine particular cases of what I argue are examples of the implementation of baseball diplomacy. There are three main concepts that are foundational to my interpretation: soft power, diplomacy, and globalization. Each of these concepts are distinct yet interrelated, and I will now take the time to explain their meaning and significance before moving onto the case studies.

### History of Professional Baseball

In New York in the 1840s, young men would gather after work to “get together and play a game [they] learned to call Base Ball...specifically, it is an adaptation of two venerable English games, rounders and cricket” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 4). Quickly spreading throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic, the game of baseball as we know it today was once referred to as “Town Ball,” “Goal Ball,” “rounders,” or “One O’Cat,” depending upon who was asked (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 5). In 1845, the first baseball association—the Knickerbocker Base Ball Club—was formed and published the game’s first official set of rules (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 5). In this early period of baseball, when it was just beginning to take shape as the sport which we currently recognize today, “there was no other club. Since no other Base Ball Club existed, no natural pairing of social equals could be arranged” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 7). There was a built-in need, then, from the beginning from the perspective of the teams themselves, for there to be a larger association or associations of teams who could compete

against each other. Further, there was demand from the perspective of spectators, which gave both immigrant families and more affluent members of society something to “watch, to bet on, to read about, and as a focal point for pregame and postgame partying” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 10). At this time, the game was still relatively contained to the Northeastern corridor of the United States and had not yet taken off as a national phenomenon.

The Civil War helped to bring baseball to new corners of the United States. As soldiers went off to their camps, they brought their newfound passion for this game and the particular skill set needed to master it. With ample idle time available to them, soldiers found “a perfect setting for ball games” which allowed Southern soldiers, who were a completely new audience, to learn the game as well (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 12). In this sense, baseball was bringing together different and diverse groups of people even domestically within the United States, from the very beginning. Although not yet helping to build stronger international relations, it is evident that the game helped to strengthen relationships at the individual level. At the end of the War, four years later in 1865, the New York style of baseball was “taken, individual by individual, to every corner of the still-growing country” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 12). This connection between military power and the proliferation of the game is one that we will return to in later chapters, as it is key to understanding not only the expansion of baseball domestically within the United States, but also essential to understanding its introduction and diplomatic capabilities later around the world.

In 1871, ten baseball clubs signed up to form the first fully professional baseball league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, known as the National Association (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 17). From the beginning, there were issues in the organizational governance of the National Association that led to its eventual demise, such as allowing teams to

set their own schedules and by charging only ten dollars for clubs to join the Association (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 17). With very little money at stake, and with the responsibility for teams to coordinate their own schedules, including travel, the National Association did not set itself up for success. Shortly after its inception, the National Association found itself floundering as it was lacking in members with business expertise. At this time, in the 1870s in the United States, great technological transformations were underway, “notably steam power, the telegraph, and, later, electricity, revolutionized transportation and communication” (Guthrie-Shimizu, 2004, 3). This meant that, for the first time, the sport of baseball could truly be monetized and transformed into a successful business, which led to the creation of the National League.

The National League of Professional Baseball Clubs, known as the National League, is the oldest major-league professional baseball league in the United States (Britannica, National League, 2024). The National League was founded in 1876 after the dissolution of the National Association of Professional Baseball Players (Britannica, National League, 2024). Formed in 1882, the American Association of Base Ball Clubs, known as the American Association, emerged as a rival to the National League and made three key business decisions that the National League had not made; namely, the American Association “sold beer and other beverages at the games, it played on Sundays where local law permitted, and it let teams charge 25 cents, not 50 cents, as the basic ticket price” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 40). Each of these business decisions helped to introduce professional baseball to a wider array of spectators who could be enticed to attend through any combination of those three decisions. Additionally, the American Association began to “compete for players,” perhaps the most influential and impactful business decision made by any professional baseball organization thus far in history (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 40). In this sense, the American Association could offer higher

salaries to potential players than the National League could, and beginning in the 1883 season, it could even poach players from the National League (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 40).

Eventually, after almost 10 seasons, the American Association became absorbed into the National League, which had more resources available at its disposal to remain the dominant league.

The American League of Professional Baseball Clubs, known as the American League, was founded seventeen years later in 1893, and was initially an association of minor-league teams that called itself the Western League (Britannica, National League 2024). After the season in 1899, the league decided to change its name from the Western league to the American Association of Professional Baseball Clubs and “declared itself a major league in 1901,” and the American League was “granted equal status by the older National League in 1903” (Britannica, American League, 2024). Beginning in 1905, “the two leagues formally agreed on a format for a World Series: four of seven; the games to be conducted by the Interleave Commission, which would be financed by a share of the receipts” (Koppett and Koppett, 2004, 99). Despite changing domestic and international political and social climates, the National League and the American League remained separate entities starting with the formal recognition of their relationship in 1903 all the way up to 2000 when “major league club owners voted unanimously to abandon the traditional arrangement and consolidate all operating functions in the commissioner’s office” (Chass, 1999). It would appear that, from a business standpoint, the consolidation efforts were well worthwhile for both individual leagues; as of 2019, the unified MLB’s revenue hit a record \$10.7 billion (Young, 2019).

## Public Diplomacy

Diplomacy, in its broadest form, can be conceived of as “the nonviolent advancement of the political, economic, cultural, and military interests” of a given state and people (Freeman, 2010, 4). Grounded in “persuasion,” diplomacy is “the form that statecraft takes in times of peace” (Freeman, 2010, 4). Historically, diplomacy has been practiced by professionals, known as diplomats, who are appointed by their respective states, and who specialize in negotiation and put forth official, state-approved talking points and ideas. In this sense, diplomats are certified representatives of their respective states; they, in a literal sense, embody the ideals of their home states. As the world has become increasingly globalized and interconnected, however, the nature of diplomacy has changed alongside it.

Diplomacy, more than a theory or abstract concept, is a practice. As mentioned above, diplomacy as a practice has historically been performed only by diplomats and other state officials in conversation with other diplomats and state officials. However, many scholars are finding the concept increasingly inadequate in successfully capturing how states currently interact and advance their interests due to the ways in which technological advancements have increased the world’s interconnectivity. Over the past sixty years, the term “public diplomacy” has been used by many scholars to address the ways in which the practice of diplomacy has adapted to new conditions, but without a concrete, shared definition. Although more expansive than the classical definition of diplomacy, public diplomacy remains a contested concept which means that its definition or use is not completely agreed upon by scholars, and remains open to new interpretations.

Edward R. Murrow, the director of the United States Information Agency (USIA) under the Kennedy Administration, first defined public diplomacy in 1963 as “interactions not only

with foreign governments but primarily with nongovernmental individuals and organization, and often presenting a variety of private views in addition to government views” (Nye, 2008, 101). Fredrick updated the definition in 1993 by adding “activities, directed abroad in the fields of information, education, and culture, whose objective is to influence a foreign government, by influencing its citizens” (Gilboa, 2008, 57). Further, Lee and Ayhan offer another definition that synthesizes aspects of the previous two offerings. Public diplomacy is “an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values” (Lee and Ayhan, 2008, 57). Public diplomacy allows for more types of actors to be included in the diplomatic process, and allows for greater diversity within the field. Non-state actors can be categorized as “nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs). One common denominator of these three broad categories is that they are not representatives of states” (Lee and Ayhan, 2008, 58). By allowing non-state actors into the diplomatic arena, diplomacy is less under the direct control of states than it ever has been before in history. Given that baseball players, spectators, teams, and professional organizations are non-state actors, it would be fair to say that sports diplomacy, and baseball diplomacy specifically, falls under the category of public diplomacy.

### Soft Power

Central to the work of diplomacy is the role of power. Whether it is traditional state-sanctioned diplomats, or unofficial non-state actors, diplomacy is fundamentally concerned with exercising different types of power to achieve certain desired outcomes. Scholar Joseph Nye

argues that there are two types of power that are key in understanding diplomacy: hard power and soft power. Hard power is coercive, where one state may threaten another with the possible outcome of violence, to make another state behave in ways that align with its political aims. Soft power, unlike hard power, “is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye, 2008, 94). Nye argues that soft power “rests on [a country’s] resources of culture, values, and policies” (Nye, 2008, 94). Therefore, if a state has a strongly defined culture, and a set of identifiable values, then it may have more persuasive capacity to influence other states’ policies and relations than through having to resort to the threat of violence. While there are several benefits to soft power, a main positive is that it does not involve alienating other states; rather than threatening possible punishment, it rests upon the ability for states to attract one another with desired social and cultural resources.

According to Nye, soft power is a strategy employed by public diplomacy. Soft power “rests primarily on three resources: [a country’s] culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (Nye, 2008, 96). Given that public diplomats are often non-state actors, including corporations and other NGOs, then it makes sense that soft power would be the type of power that they’re able to work within. Nye writes that “culture is the set of practices that create meaning for a society,” which includes “literature, art, and education” and “mass entertainment” (Nye, 2008, 96). Corporations and NGOs are often the producers or facilitators of culture, such as companies like Nike, which influence fashion and street style, or Netflix, which helps to set the agenda for what types of shows and movies people consume. Given the extremely wide reach of these kinds of companies, they act as ambassadors—or public diplomats—of the United States, representing American

culture and values on an international level. They help to promote a positive image of the United States, and also to generate interest in American popular culture, which in turn leads other states' citizens to develop a positive and lasting interest in American life, as Nye writes that the representatives of American companies "and brands directly touch the lives of far more people than government representatives do" (Nye, 2008, 105).

Although there is limited literature on the relationship between public diplomacy and soft power, it is clear that public diplomats—which includes corporations like MLB—exercise soft power over other states through the cultural value of their brand. Through the rapid rise of technology in the early 21st century, brands are able to reach more people than ever before around the world. In doing so, they are able to attract new consumers who form positive associations with that company or brand. While soft power is not a complete diplomatic strategy on its own, when combined with hard power, it can be an effective tool for exercising influence over other states' citizens in a non-threatening, non-coercive manner.

### Globalization

Public diplomacy, as we know it today, would not be possible without the development of contemporary globalization since the Industrial Revolution began in the mid-19th century. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye argue that globalization is based on "globalism" which is a much older phenomenon (Keohane and Nye, 2000, 111). What distinguishes contemporary globalization from historic globalism, or "networks of interdependency" is the "sheer magnitude, complexity, and speed" of exchange between states (Keohane and Nye, 2000, 112). Beyond this initial framework are many other competing definitions of globalization. First used by economist Levitt in 1983, the term globalization can refer to a concept as broad as "a continuous

transnational process of interconnectedness” (Pooch, 16). Scholar Jim Dator offers a more narrow and specific definition as, “globalization means not only the worldwide capitalist system called ‘neoliberalism,’ but also the full range of forces and factors that are sweeping across the globe totally unhindered, or barely hindered, by the boundaries and policies of the nation-state” (Dator, et. al., 2006, 13). Dator’s definition emphasizes how the concept of the nation-state is possibly less important than it once was, which is compatible with the notion of public diplomacy, which demonstrates the importance of non-state actors within foreign affairs.

Globalization is one means through which we can understand the transfer and proliferation of ideas, products, brands, and values around the world. As the world has become increasingly interconnected, especially through the rise of the internet and personal computers in the past 30 years, and smartphones in the past 15 or so years, people are more connected than ever before. Supporting this, Dator notes that “globalization also includes the spread of certain ideas, values, and practices, such as ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’...that challenge conventional theories and methods of governance” (Dator, et. al., 2006, 13). Keohane and Nye expand upon this idea, defining “social and cultural globalism” as “the movement of ideas, information, images, and people” which has often “followed military and economic globalism” (Keohane and Nye, 2000, 107). As a state’s values and culture are key assets in its arsenal of soft power, Dator shows how globalization is one mechanism through which soft power is exercised. Keohane and Nye, by noting that social and cultural globalism often follows from economic or military involvement, show how the use of soft power (cultural exchange) can follow after the use of hard power (military force).

### Sports Diplomacy: Baseball as Strategy

Derek Shearer writes that “sport is one of the great commonalities of human beings. More people watch or play sports than almost any other activity” (Shearer, 2014, 53). Almost universally enjoyed, sports are central to human culture and society. While there is still relatively little literature on public diplomacy, there is even less published on “sports diplomacy,” or the idea that sports can serve as a diplomatic tool for states to use in their foreign policy strategy. Given the central importance of sports in shaping social culture and values, it is notable that this subfield of political science remains understudied.

The connection between sports and politics, especially sports and diplomacy, might not immediately seem obvious. However, Lincoln Allison and Terry Monnington write that “sport is unusually free from constraints on the development of global markets in images and labor” (Allison and Monnington, 2002, 106). Therefore, we see that through mechanisms of globalization mentioned above, sports are able to travel around the world and are not limited to state borders or boundaries. This makes them well positioned to be utilized as a tool of diplomacy. Further, Allison and Monnington write “sport is an important part of the images of nations and states and of the process of socialization of young people into global society” (Allison and Monnington, 2002, 106). Sports are a clear cultural product and cultural export that can be marketed to audiences of all ages all around the world, contributing to their potential to serve as a tool of soft power. Shearer echoes this same argument, writing that “sport reflects and affects ideas of race, sex, class, as well as national pride and identity. Sport can change a country’s ‘brand’” (Shearer, 2014, 53). It is clear then that sports can serve as a means of improving a state’s image, or generating international interest and approval.

Allison and Monnington are somewhat skeptical of the degree to which sports can generate real material power for states, for example, soft power. They write “we must surely allow that there can be benefits in status or prestige which are distinct from those in power” (Allison and Monnington, 2002, 111). Using Nye’s theory of soft power, I would argue that “benefits in status or prestige” are themselves foundational to the strength of a state’s tools of soft power. While status or prestige may not directly influence a state’s power in foreign affairs, status and prestige do have the influence to sway consumers, change a population’s perception of a given state, or generate new interest in traveling to another country. Each of these are tools of soft power that act to persuade a given country’s popular opinion on international issues, the broader effects of which can be seen in election and polling results. Therefore, I argue that status and prestige are themselves a certain building block of soft power, and are directly relevant to diplomatic efforts.

Shearer writes that “in a globalized world, sport...can increase national pride, spread national influence” and can foster “communication and international understanding” (Shearer, 2014, 56). While Shearer does not write specifically or exclusively about baseball, instead focusing attention on examples such as “ping-pong diplomacy between the US and the People’s Republic of China in 1971,” I argue that baseball has acted as a key tool of American public diplomacy, dating back to the late 19th century (Shearer, 2014, 56). Roberto González Echevarría writes that unlike other professional sports, baseball is unique in that it has “an American ethos, an American mindset, as well as American values that would affect the political, social, and economic makeup of the countries where the game is played” (Echevarría, 2000). The distinctly American qualities of baseball make it a strong contender to study. Although other

sports, like soccer, are more popular globally than baseball, due to its uniquely American history and values, baseball is an ideal lens through which to study American sports diplomacy.

While the term “baseball diplomacy” has primarily been used by journalists and scholars to describe the relationship between the United States and Cuba, I argue that the concept of baseball diplomacy can be applied more widely to other states as well, and that the US-Cuban case is only one example of a broader phenomenon. I define baseball diplomacy as a subtype of sports diplomacy: through globalization, baseball has reached nearly every corner of the world and, with its reach, the US is able to leverage the game, including its brand, image, history, values, and culture to promote its political agenda. Baseball diplomacy encompasses the ways in which the interconnected network of baseball today--including non-state actors such as Major League Baseball (MLB), professional players, brands, fans, amateur players, and spectators--serves as a mechanism that can be used for diplomatic purposes to advance the promotion of American values such as democracy, hard work, freedom, capitalism, and upward mobility. Although baseball diplomacy is not an “official” diplomatic strategy of the US, in the chapters to follow, I show how the US has utilized baseball as an unofficial diplomatic strategy, both to great success, in the DR, and in ways that remain strained, in Cuba. Regardless of the success of the outcome, it is clear that from historical accounts, there is a need for the concept of baseball diplomacy within political science literature.



## Chapter 2: Baseball Diplomacy in Cuba: A Pathway toward Future Repair

### Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the historic and contemporary relationship between the US and Cuba, specifically through the lens of baseball diplomacy. First, I start by providing an overview of the history of US-Cuban relations, starting in 1895. I then turn to key examples of attempts the US has made throughout the 20th and 21st centuries at implementing “baseball diplomacy” as part of its diplomatic strategy. Next, I argue that although tensions still exist between the US and Cuba, and that relations have not been fully repaired, that baseball still remains an important diplomatic tool. I argue that, due to a shared love of the game, baseball has the potential to shift the narrative and perception of both the US and Cuba by both country’s populations, therefore opening the door for an improved political and economic relationship in the future through baseball diplomacy’s ability to ease political and economic tensions.

### History of Cuban-American Relations

Cuba and the United States have long had a complicated relationship. The Spanish-American War of 1898 led to the end of Spain’s reign as a dominant colonial power in the West (Britannica, Spanish American War, 2024). Between 1895 and 1898, Cuban revolutionaries fought desperately to escape from Spain’s colonial rule, looking toward independence. Cuba, an island in the Caribbean with a total land mass of 42,400 square miles, is the eighth-largest island nation in the world (Knight and Levinson, 2024). Located just south of the state of Florida, Cuba maintains incredibly close geographic proximity to the United States.

This geographic proximity spawned interest in Cuba by Americans very early on, and the conflict between Cubans and Spanish colonizers only served to heighten this interest.

The Spanish-American War is notable in international relations (IR) history for several reasons, and has had a direct influence on American diplomatic relationships around the world. According to scholars Alexis Heraclides and Ada Dialla, “the uprising in Cuba and the slipping away of the Spanish overseas empire in the two great oceans provided the US with an unprecedented opportunity” (Heraclides and Dialla, 2015, 200). While some argue that the US intervened in the Cuban revolt for humanitarian reasons, which may well be true, Heraclides and Dialla assert that the US saw this conflict as an opportunity to “symbolize their great power status and deliberately propagate greatness” (Heraclides and Dialla, 2015, 200). The Spanish-American War served to cement three main themes: “(1) the war re-united ‘the nation’, healing the wounds of the American Civil War; (2) crushing Spain marked the historical moment when the US emerged as a great power; and (3) the victory confirmed that the US was ‘the nation of progressive civilization’” (Heraclides and Dialla, 2015, 212). It is clear, then, that the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 helped to solidify the US’s status as a global hegemonic power, and one that exercises power over Cuba.

Rather than ushering in complete Cuban freedom, the liberation of Cuba from the Spanish in 1898 instead brought about the Platt Amendment, introduced by US President Theodore Roosevelt. The Platt Amendment’s preamble included language such as “the President is hereby authorized to leave the government and control of the island to its people as soon as a government shall have been established in said island under a constitution which, as part thereof or in ordinance appended thereto, shall define the future relations of the United States with Cuba” (Rodriguez and Targ, 2015, 22). The Platt Amendment clearly defined that Cuba must

continue an ongoing relationship with the US, and that it is only entitled to its full independence once the President of the United States has approved of its new constitution. In this sense, according to many historians and scholars, Cuba effectively became a de-facto colony of the US, trading Spain's rule for American hegemony. President Roosevelt himself refuted these ideas, arguing that "all that this country desires is to see the neighboring countries stable, orderly, and prosperous. Any country whose people conduct themselves can well count upon our hearty friendship" (Rodriguez and Targ, 2015, 22).

The Platt Amendment, and the coercive relationship it established with the US can be viewed as an example of hard power diplomacy. While without conflict, the US asserted a treaty that allowed the US to set up a naval base on the island of Cuba, limited Cuba's ability to sign treaties with other states, and Cuba was not permitted to transfer land to any other states besides the US (Britannica, Platt Amendment, 2019). Although the US did not directly threaten violence against Cuba, the nature of the Platt Amendment is one of hard power diplomacy, by working to coerce certain actions by a state rather than appealing to shared cultural values. In 1902, the US finally withdrew its troops from any military bases, and Cuba finally became a republic of its own (Britannica, Platt Amendment, 2019). Therefore, the US and Cuba maintained somewhat of a complicated and strained relationship after 1898 through 1902, despite the US's success at liberating Cuba from Spain's colonial rule.

While the US withdrew its troops in 1902, the Platt Amendment was only terminated in 1934 as a result of the "Good Neighbor Policy" (Horowitz, 2002, 59). Irving Louis Horowitz writes that, throughout the 20th century, "external forces rather than internal actors determined the course of Cuba's national existence" (Horowitz, 2002, 59). The Cuban Revolution in 1959 helps display this interpretation. During the Cold War, "US foreign policymakers framed

explanations of policy in terms of a dichotomy of Pro-American versus Anti-American positions” (Rodriguez and Targ, 2015, 25). Seeing through this lens, and acting as one of the most powerful countries on earth, the US approached its relationship with Cuba in the mid 20th century through this same lens. Tensions between the two states had begun to rise, after revolutionary Fidel Castro had visited the US in 1959 and was “ignored by the president” (Rodriguez and Targ, 2015, 26).

Sealing the fate of US-Cuban relations, Castro “signed trade agreements with the Soviet Union in February 1960” (Rodriguez and Targ, 2015, 26). In doing so, Castro knew that he was sending a clear anti-American signal out into the world of foreign affairs, at a crucial moment that escalated Cold War tensions. These tensions only continued to escalate, with the Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961 that was orchestrated by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and which attempted to overthrow Castro—a clear example of the US exercising hard power diplomacy, as the threat of nuclear war was on the line (Britannica, Bay of Pigs invasion, 2024). The Bay of Pigs tried to reestablish American dominance over the island nation, and yet could not successfully do so. Instead, Castro remained in power for almost fifty years until 2008 (Britannica, Bay of Pigs invasion, 2024). It is clear, then, that a purely hard-power strategy of diplomacy was not well suited to the Cuban-American tensions that ebbed over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st, and that the US’s diplomatic strategy has room to benefit from the incorporation of more soft power practices.

One of the clearest examples of American hard power diplomacy in the case of Cuba is the embargo. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy placed a trade embargo between the US and Cuba in response to the Cuban allegiance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War (Knight and Levinson, 2024). This trade embargo forbids all economic trade between the US and Cuba,

and remains in effect today, in 2024. The embargo has, without question, greatly influenced the sport of baseball and its business component in Cuba since its enactment in 1962. The fact that the embargo still exists today is a clear sign that US-Cuban relations remain strained and have not fully repaired themselves since 1959, or even before then. In the following section, however, I aim to provide an understanding of baseball's history in Cuba.

### Baseball: Cuba's Favorite Pastime

Cuba's social and cultural development over the past nearly 150 years has not been straightforward. With a history of Spanish and, arguably, American colonization, with isolationist tendencies and dominant communist ideology, Cuba is a melting pot of cultural histories. Horowitz notes that "the problem for Cuba, after securing its independence, was the ambiguity of the outcome. It achieved a result that it desired without devising a method for accomplishing it" (Horowitz, 2002, 60). In other words, Cuba lacked a cohesive national narrative and was culturally ambiguous. Horowitz argues that Castro was seeking to move beyond this political and social uncertainty by creating "nationalist closure" (Horowitz, 2002, 60). As noted in the introduction, sports have often served as a tool for uniting people both within and across cultures. For this reason, I will examine how baseball has served as a tool for uniting Cubans and how it has been a primary component in generating a "a source of liberation and a means of nationality" (Perez, Jr., 1994, 494).

Under Spanish colonial rule, in the mid 19th century, Cuba found itself in a moment of transition. "Economic and political relations" between Cuba and Spain were changing, "class structures...and cultural forms were in flux," leading to "shift the Cuban orientation from Madrid and Barcelona toward Washington and New York" (Perez Jr., 1994, 495). Due to many of these

factors, beginning in the 1830s and 1840s, many Cubans began emigrating to the United States, where they worked for American companies and enrolled their children in American schools. According to scholar Louis Perez Jr., “the rising popularity of baseball in the United States coincided with the years when Cuban immigration was the greatest,” also taking place in many of the American cities with the largest Cuban populations (Perez Jr., 1994, 499). In searching for a better future, Cuban immigrants ended up finding a national identity that shared many similarities with that of the US, despite each country’s vastly different political situations.

Perez argues that it is not an accident that Cuban immigrants took to baseball so quickly, as they “received [it] as a medium of North American culture, able to reproduce social relationships and reveal normative boundaries of North American society” (Perez Jr., 1994, 499). In this way, Cubans saw that playing baseball was a way to become more familiar with American values and norms and to better fit into society. Baseball not only served as a fun game to play with friends, after work, or at school; instead, it took on greater meaning, becoming a way to create a new identity and to assimilate into a new culture. The game worked to transcend the boundaries of language and to introduce diverse groups of people to one another, uniting them over a shared enjoyment of the sport. In this sense, baseball was even functioning diplomatically within the US in the mid 19th century.

In the early 1860s, baseball began to make its way onto Cuban shores, when Cuban students returned from attending American colleges and universities. The effects of baseball’s early popularity in Cuba are still present today. Baseball almost immediately became extremely popular across the island: “virtually every town and city of any size organized at least one baseball team” (Perez Jr., 1994, 502). Just as technological developments help baseball spread across the globe through globalization, the development of railroads across the island of Cuba

helped to transport fans and spectators to view games. The same technological advancements and their results were on display in Cuba, just on a domestic scale. Not long after landing on the island, baseball became a central part of Cuban culture, and Cuban teams became skilled enough to begin competing against Americans.

Baseball quickly became a means of uniting Cubans with American culture, which worked to “sharpen distinctions between Cubans and Spaniards” during a time before the Spanish-American War when “those distinctions were already increasingly assuming political implications” (Perez Jr., 1994, 507). This highlights the tension between the social and the political relationships between the US and Cuba in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As we saw in the previous section, the US’s intervention in helping overthrow and oust Spanish colonial rule was not universally well received by Cubans, and the American intentions remain debatable. At the same time, however, Cubans on an individual level had developed an affinity for American culture through their experiences emigrating to the US, and becoming fully assimilated into American political culture and ideals. Therefore, there is a tension in the relationship between Cuban and American political actors at the time, and the ways that the actual civilian populations felt about each others’ cultures. Perez notes that “baseball offered the possibility of national integration of all Cubans, of all classes, black and white, young and old, men and women,” but I would argue even further that baseball offered the possibility of international integration of all Cubans and Americans, to create a shared international culture that transcends language and politics (Perez Jr., 1994, 507).

This period before the end of the Spanish-American War also helps to illuminate the ways in which Cubans and Americans have, in fact, historically both benefited from free trade and equal exchange with one another. It is clear that these benefits were known, at least, to

Cuban nationals in the mid to late 19th century, who embraced American culture and brought it back to their homeland. Baseball's arrival in Cuba was only possible without sanctions or embargoes, both of which would have prevented any cultural, social, political, or economic exchange from being able to occur. One could argue that this was the first period of "baseball diplomacy" ever exercised by the US, and that it occurred on its very own soil. By allowing Cuban immigrants into the US, baseball did the work of selling itself as a major cultural export, and led to the proliferation of American values across the Cuban island once immigrants returned and opened their own businesses. In the following section, I argue that although US-imposed sanctions still exist on Cuba, that baseball diplomacy is one pathway forward to a more collaborative future.

#### Cuban Baseball Diplomacy, Then and Now

In 2000, after the Baltimore Orioles played a historic two-game baseball series in Cuba the year prior, it was revealed by the National Security Archive that attempts had been made by US State Department officials to arrange a US-Cuban baseball game in 1975 (National Security Archive Briefing Book). This would have been a radical decision on the part of US officials, as the Cold War was still raging on. The documents that were revealed were wide ranging and encompassed both unclassified and declassified information. It was revealed that in January 1975, US Baseball Commissioner Bowie K. Kuhn wrote to then-US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to suggest that the Cuban Government Sports Agency (INDER) wanted a Major League Baseball (MLB) team to come play a series in Havana, which would then open up the possibility for more games in the United States (National Security Archive Briefing Book). Kissinger's aide to Latin America, Assistant Secretary of State William Rogers, argued that these

baseball games would carry “symbolic significance not limited to the sports pages” and that it would “bridge the gap between the Bay of Pigs and a new relationship with Castro” (National Security Archive Briefing Book). Kuhn’s attempts at gaining any approval to participate in these games were a failure, as Kissinger rejected his proposals.

Although Kuhn’s attempts did not succeed, and no games were held between Cuban and American teams until the Orioles game in 1999, this example of baseball diplomacy is incredibly important for two reasons: it demonstrates a concrete moment in which baseball was leveraged as a political tool, and it provides an understanding a path forward for US-Cuban relations today. Despite public diplomacy existing on the fringe of IR theory, Kuhn’s suggestion that MLB teams play a series of games in Havana is a form of public diplomacy, specifically baseball diplomacy. This moment marked the first instance of a time when the US utilized baseball as a political tool of soft power in foreign affairs. By offering to have American players come to Havana, the documents reveal that the US officials believed that this kind of soft intervention would work. Instead of proposing to send diplomats over, or to reopen the US embassy, the proposal instead focused on sending over the group of people who would most likely be welcomed, celebrated, and embraced by Cuban nationals and Cuban officials alike. Baseball was harnessed as a strategic mechanism for peacebuilding and generating positive bonds over shared interests, which is foundational to the concept of diplomacy. As suggested by Thomas Garofalo, “those who would like to see an end to the long conflict between Cuba and the United States have often looked to baseball, both nations’ shared national pastime, as a bridge for mutual understanding” (Garofalo, 2010, 25). While Garofalo also does not use the term public diplomacy, he, too, is describing it exactly. As noted in the introduction, this particular form of public diplomacy—using baseball as a bridge across differences—can be thought of as baseball

diplomacy, and while Kuhn may not have gotten his way in 1975, there is still room for baseball diplomacy to be implemented now, in 2024 and beyond.

It was through early globalism and then globalization that baseball initially arrived in Cuba, and since the initial trade embargo was placed on Cuba in 1962, technology has continued to advance at faster paces than ever before. While Cuba remains isolated from the United States in many ways, the internet has made it possible for people to become increasingly interconnected, including generating new fans of MLB. Although no MLB games have been officially broadcast in Cuba since 1961, in July 2013, “Cubans got to watch something on their television screens this week that this baseball crazed island hasn’t seen in more than half a century: a Major League Baseball game broadcast in its entirety on the open airwaves” (Calcaterra, 2013). It turned out that the game was not officially broadcast by MLB, but rather it was a taping of a game that had occurred two months prior. This highlights how the rise of the internet has allowed people to gain access to MLB games, even through unofficial means, which demonstrates the desire and demand for this kind of programming and open exchange, as many Cubans are MLB fans and many go on to become professional players themselves—a process which is incredibly difficult and legally challenging due to the embargo. Introducing MLB to new audiences such as Cuban nationals who have long been unable to watch games provides another avenue for American values to be promoted and shared. Being able to watch MLB games, even if streamed in Cuba through questionable means, allows Cubans a glimpse into American culture and American life that they cannot otherwise access or see due to restrictions from the embargo. In an indirect way, MLB commentators act as public diplomats by narrating games and bringing them to life on the screen for viewers at home, generating excitement and

interest that could lead to a broader acceptance of American culture, and eventually, improved diplomatic relations and a possible end to the embargo.

Attempts to connect with American culture over baseball, such as the one noted above, demonstrate how the desire of the Cuban and American people may differ from the political aims of each state. In this sense, the state's position on issues in Cuba and the way Cuba is portrayed in the media is less important than the way the masses feel about it, which is shown through the strength of public diplomacy. In line with the 2013 broadcast of an MLB game, over the past 30 or so years, the public opinion on Cuba has been changing and becoming more positive. In 1999, the Clinton administration worked to improve US-Cuban relations, even proposing a form of baseball diplomacy as a tool of soft power to win over the Cuban people. In a letter from the Clinton administration in 1999, Chief of Staff Erskine B. Bowles wrote, "the Administration's policy is to promote a peaceful democratic transition in Cuba...various humanitarian measures and people-to-people contacts are intended to provide direct benefit and support to the Cuban people. Amateur sports, in the context of both international events and bilateral exchanges, have been an important part of the people to people interaction" (Bowles, 1998). The Clinton administration's proposal here is a direct example of baseball diplomacy. Bowles suggests that a shared love of the game of baseball has the possibility to lead to a "peaceful democratic transition," through its embodiment of American values which would be shared between individuals playing the game (Bowles, 1998). It was this attempt at baseball diplomacy that led to the two-game Baltimore Orioles series in Havana later that year.

Although no major policy changes resulted from the historic Orioles game in Havana in 1999, it is still an important example of baseball diplomacy, as it demonstrated to a global audience—through the globalization of media—that the US and Cuba had a shared passion and

could collaborate with one another. The Obama administration further advanced US-Cuba diplomacy by reopening the US Embassy in Havana and the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C., in 2015 (National Archives). The Obama administration also re-opened travel between the US and Cuba and enhanced telecommunications technology, even stating “to the Cuban people, America extends a hand of friendship” (Obama, 2014). The Obama administration’s position on Cuba differed radically from most other US presidents in history; however, under the Trump administration, much of the progress that had been made was reversed. In the past couple of years, however, there have been signs of a resurgence in baseball diplomacy as a proposed tool of US foreign relations with Cuba, which I will examine below.

### Baseball Diplomacy’s Future in Cuba

In recent years, there has been a resurgence in the idea of baseball diplomacy as a pathway forward for the US to establish a better relationship with Cuba. In 2021, for example, Congressman Steve Cohen introduced the “Baseball Diplomacy Act” which proposed to “eliminate barriers to Cuban athletes entering the US on non-immigrant visas only for the duration of the baseball season” and which would “allow players to retain their Cuban citizenship and return to Cuba with their earnings” (Cohen, 2021). Due to the embargo and sanctions on Cuba from the US, Cuban players are unable to immigrate to the US with ease, and instead have to defect to other countries and then be smuggled illegally into the US (Thames, 2023). Congressman Cohen reintroduced the bill in the 2023 legislative session after it did not pass in 2021 (Cohen, 2023). While this bill calls itself “baseball diplomacy,” it is only public diplomacy in a very narrow sense, as it only applies directly to Cuban baseball players, rather than Cuban nationals more generally.

In 2023, however, a positive change emerged from baseball diplomacy that can contribute to future instances of effective baseball diplomacy. The World Baseball Classic (WBC) is an international baseball tournament that was first held in 2006, and which is organized in partnership with MLB (Frommer, 2024). The WBC takes place every four years, and for the first time, in 2023, the US allowed “Cuban-born MLB players” to “play for their homeland in the WBC” (Thames, 2023). The President of the Baseball Federation of Cuba (FCB) called it “a positive step” between the US and Cuba (Janetsky, 2023). This particular instance does not address the broader sanctions between the US and Cuba that make it nearly impossible for Cuban players to join MLB teams. However, by allowing Cuban-born players to represent their home country of Cuba, rather than the US, it demonstrates that some progress has been made, and the success of this tournament can contribute to paving the way for future uses of baseball diplomacy as a tool of soft power by the US, in order to repair and strengthen its relationship with Cuba.

The future of US-Cuban relations cannot be known, but it is clear that baseball is a mutually shared pastime and love of both Americans and Cubans alike. While the US has adopted many hard power strategies in its diplomatic approach toward Cuba in the past—most notably, with the Bay of Pigs Invasion and the trade embargo—these efforts have not proven to be completely effective. If anything, the US and Cuba remain in the same kind of position they were in decades ago, with very little progress having been established over the past century, as the US has maintained extreme sanctions over Cuba throughout this time. On the other hand, historically, it is clear that baseball diplomacy alone has not been enough to rebuild and repair US-Cuban relations. Over the past 30 years, popular “opposition to the Cuban embargo has been constant and growing” in the US (Garofolo, 2010, 25). Originally intended to suppress

anti-American sentiment and to prevent the proliferation of communist ideology around the world, the embargo on Cuba was intended to curtail Castro's rule. Despite Castro having been out of office since 2008, and his death in 2019, the US has continued, overall, to "steadily tighten restrictions on Cuba," which has maintained its radical political and economic stance and influential Communist party (Katz, 2005, 8). Therefore, it is clear that the embargo on Cuba is not an effective tool to coerce Cuba's officials to behave in ways that American policymakers would prefer. Instead, an alternative approach is necessary.

Congressman Cohen's proposed Baseball Diplomacy Act, and the WBC allowing Cuban-born MLB players to represent Cuba, serve as a strong starting point for thinking about baseball diplomacy in the 21st century. Baseball has brought together Americans and Cubans over the course of nearly two centuries, cementing a bond and shared language through sport that no sanctions or economic policies have been able to undo. If the US were to lift sanctions on Cuba, then Cuban baseball players would be able to legally immigrate to the US and join MLB teams, which would have beneficial social, political, and economic effects in both the US and Cuba. As a non-state actor, MLB is uniquely positioned to influence Cuban politics. MLB has an incredibly strong brand that is associated with the American values that are central to the sport of baseball, and marketing MLB to a Cuban audience is one means by which the US could increase its presence in Cuba without having to rely upon traditional methods of diplomacy which have proven to be inadequate in working to establish strong ties with Cuba. In this sense, MLB would be exercising soft power in Cuba; working to attract Cuban citizens and political officials to the cultural values it puts forth, and in the long term, to establish a positive image of the US where it has almost always been viewed critically.



### Chapter 3: Baseball Diplomacy in the Dominican Republic: A Radical Success

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the history that has led to the extreme popularity of baseball in the Dominican Republic (DR). In doing so, I examine the history of foreign relations between the US and the DR, paying close attention to the fact that, I argue, this relationship is understudied. First, I provide an overview of the history of US-DR relations dating back to the mid 19th century. Then, I turn to the long history of Dominican labor in the US, arguing that baseball diplomacy has succeeded in the DR in ways that it failed historically in Cuba. Next, I look at the current climate of US-DR relations, and propose that baseball diplomacy can continue to be improved upon.

#### History of US-DR Relations: A Colonial Past

The Dominican Republic is a nation located on the island of Hispaniola with a population of roughly 11.3 million people, and without question, baseball is the most popular sport within the small island (Wiarda, 2024). As of 2022, the DR has a GDP of \$113.54 billion; however, the GDP per capita is only \$10,111 (World Bank Open Data, 2024). Notably, like Cuba, the DR is a country that was colonized by Spain as early as the 15th century for its rich deposits of natural resources and of labor, and which retains a strong Spanish influence on culture and politics. The effects of colonization on the DR's economy are still evident today, but what is less often discussed is the US's role in shaping the Dominican economy and political ideology.

Since the mid 19th century, the DR has been a melting pot of people and cultures from all around the globe due to it being a site of colonization. Historian Michael Hall argues that the DR

can be seen as a “‘microcosm’ of the entire [Caribbean] region” (Hall, 2006, 13). This is due to the many transitions in political regimes, its history of colonization, and interconnectedness and importance with Western economies.

From the early to mid 19th century through today, the DR has experienced colonial rule, independence, dictatorships, and democracy. After several hundred years of colonial rule, in 1821, “Spanish-speaking colonists declared themselves independent” from Spain (Hall, 2006, 13). This did not last long, however, as the DR was colonized by Haiti, the other nation that it shares its island with, the following year in 1822 (Hall, 2006, 13). The DR did not regain independence from Haiti “until 1844,” which then kicked off nearly a century of “internal war, foreign intervention, and incompetent and corrupt governments,” through 1930 (Hall, 2006, 13). The US has had a strong influence over the DR since the late 19th century, even before it occupied the emerging state with Marines three times in the 20th century. Scholar Abraham Lowenthal writes that “although nominally sovereign and independent since 1844, the Dominican Republic has never been able to exclude the predominant influence of the United States” (Lowenthal, 1970, 31). Dominican officials even went so far, in 1849, to request that the DR be annexed by the US—a proposal that was rejected (Lowenthal, 1970, 31). Therefore, we see that American influence over the DR has a long history, which is directly linked with the popularity of baseball in the DR both in history and today.

Early traces of American influence were also extremely evident in the development of the DR’s economy following its independence from Haiti. According to Suzy Castor and Lynn Garafola, starting in the late 19th century, “a capitalist sector...had been developing in the heart of Dominican society and its economy. This development sparked reactions in the overall economy; it led to a rise in exports, the creation of an infrastructure (telephones, highways,

railroads, importation of equipment, port improvements), and the introduction of wages in production relationships. This new capitalist sector was almost exclusively controlled by foreigners, who were of course Americans" (Castor and Garafola, 1974, 263-264). While there is not a lot of literature on this early capitalist development in the DR, I argue that it is of central importance to the effectiveness of baseball diplomacy exercised by the US later on. In assisting the creation of a capitalist economy, the US paved the way for acclimating the population to other American values and cultural objects, like baseball. Despite tension and resistance that unquestionably occurred between Dominicans and the American businessmen who worked to set up shop in their country, this dynamic is incredibly important in distinguishing US-Cuban relations from US-DR relations, and helped prevent the adoption of communist, anti-American ideology, which has been one of the main goals of American diplomacy. I will return to this idea in the following sections.

During this time, through 1930, the US sent Marines over to the DR twice: first in 1905 and again in 1916, as part of the foreign intervention mentioned by Hall. Leading up to 1916, the DR experienced the quick succession of five regimes in five years, from 1911 to 1916, which greatly destabilized the newly emerging nation state (Castor and Garafola, 1974, 255). In looking to exercise power over the political outcomes of the DR, in May 1916, "the United States landed six hundred Marines in the capital. By July all strategic points in the country were occupied" (Castor and Garafola, 1974, 255). It is clear that this stretch of the DR's history, from 1821 to 1930, was one of incredible turmoil and turnover. After multiple forms of colonial domination, the country was unstable and lacking in a clear pathway toward stability. Sovereign rule had been difficult to maintain.

In 1930, however, this political turmoil only continued, when Rafael Leonidis Trujillo Molina “overthrew the government and established an authoritarian dictatorship that lasted for over three decades” (Hall, 2006, 14). The Trujillo era was one of great financial success for the DR; the sugar industry had taken off and become more successful than ever before, and allowed Trujillo to “[pay] off the nation’s foreign debts, [develop] a national infrastructure, and [lay] the groundwork for economic development by promoting industrialization” (Hall, 2006, 14). While this may sound like a positive development for the DR at first, as these are all great strides toward stability and lasting independence, Trujillo’s “seven intelligence agencies enabled the dictator to establish one of Latin America’s most brutal authoritarian dictatorships” (Hall, 2006, 14). The tradeoff for these economic and technological advancements was “the complete loss of personal freedom of the Dominican people” (Hall, 2006, 14). By limiting freedom and independence to an extreme degree, Trujillo worked to effectively prevent Dominicans from developing a distinct culture. This also helped the popularization of baseball—which Trujillo did approve of—become central to Dominican identity.

While there is widespread literature available on the history of US-Cuban relations, there has been much less written about the history of the US and the DR. This is notable for several reasons; however, according to Lowenthal, it is particularly noteworthy because “perhaps in no other country has the influence of the United States been so long and so continuously exerted as in the Dominican Republic, yet in few places have the limits of America’s power to transform foreign realities been more evident” (Lowenthal, 1970, 30). Lowenthal writes that the US sent Marines to Santo Domingo, the DR’s capital, “three times within sixty years—in 1905, in 1916, and in 1965” (Lowenthal, 1970, 30). Further, the US has maintained a presence on the island

nation prior to these interventions, and has continued to maintain a strong influence even after them.

In 1961, the American presence in the DR was once again made known. Trujillo was “assassinated by a group of conspirators who had been both accomplices and victims of the dictatorship” who were “armed with weapons provided by the United States” (Hall, 2006, 14). Therefore, the US had a direct hand in overturning Trujillo’s regime and in attempting to establish a democratic process in the DR. In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson “ordered 23,000 Marines to invade the Dominican Republic” which was “the first overt use of US military forces in Latin America since the Marines were withdrawn from Haiti in 1934,” which was intended to prevent communist ideology from taking hold in the DR as it had in Cuba (Hall, 2006, 15). This led to a US-supervised election in 1966 which finally led to the establishment of a democratic regime.

Although this is not a complete history of US-DR relations, it is intended to show the extreme involvement of the US in the history of the development of the DR as a modern state. Lowenthal argues persuasively that “the fundamental US aim in the Dominican Republic and the entire Caribbean has always been the same: to assure that no situation actually or even potentially damaging to US security has a chance to develop” (Lowenthal, 1970, 44). In other words, the US’s involvement in the DR has primarily been focused on promoting pro-American sentiment and exposing the population to American values, establishing a free-market capitalist economy with a hierarchical social structure. In the following sections, I will show how baseball has played a key role in this political and diplomatic history between the US and the DR, and how it has led to the DR becoming the main country in which foreign MLB players are born.

### Dominican Baseball: Culture, Heart, Diplomacy

Baseball is at the center of culture and social life in the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic is a nation located on the island of Hispaniola with a population of roughly 11.3 million people, and without question, baseball is the most popular sport within the relatively small state (Wiarda, 2024). Cubans, interestingly, were the first group to introduce baseball to Dominicans. In the second half of the 19th century, visitors and expats from Cuba brought baseball along with them on their travels (Klein, 2014, 26). As we saw in the previous chapter, baseball was first introduced to Cubans by Americans. During this period where Cubans brought baseball to the DR, American influence, as shown above, was incredibly strong. In this sense, there is a certain kind of circular economy at play: American influence → Cuban influence → new Dominican culture → American influence. According to MLB, the first official baseball game in the Dominican Republic occurred on September 25, 1886, in San Pedro de Macorís between two Cuban teams (Venn, 2023). In 1890, four years after the first game on Dominican soil took place, the first professional circuit in the Dominican Republic was established with two local teams: Ozama and Nuevo Club (Venn, 2023). Baseball, then, has been played almost as long in the Dominican Republic as it has been in Cuba, and nearly as long as it has existed in the US, remaining the most popular sport in both Cuba and the DR today.

Unlike Cuba, however, the DR's relationship with the US could not have been created more intentionally or shaped more strongly by US efforts, as shown above. This is not an accident; by exercising its imperial power, US officials aimed to transform the DR into a democratic state with a capitalist, free-market economy. Therefore, it is not entirely surprising that the effects of that effort are still present today, and have proven heavily influential in the development of baseball as a 'product' or professional players as an export from the DR to the

US, in particular. While baseball is undoubtedly utilized as a tool of soft power for the DR as it is for Cuba, there is far less economic, social, and political tension between these countries.

In this section, I argue that the DR is better situated than Cuba, by virtue of its economic status as a free-market democracy and strong diplomatic ties to the US, to harness baseball not only as a means of connecting people on an individual level, but as a tool for economic advancement. This, I argue, is a direct result of the US's implementation of baseball diplomacy as a component of its "smart power" diplomacy, which Nye defines as a diplomatic strategy consisting of both hard and soft power (Nye, 2014, xiii). Because there are no sanctions or embargoes on the DR as there are in Cuba, MLB has been able to establish a major presence in the DR, both economically and culturally. I argue that MLB has functioned, and continues to function, as a non-state actor working in a diplomatic capacity to implement baseball diplomacy. While there is very limited literature from a Dominican perspective available on the topic, I argue that MLB's strong economic success and a lack of political upset between the US-DR exemplifies the effectiveness of this strategy of baseball diplomacy.

### Baseball Diplomacy in the DR

Baseball traveled to the DR through mechanisms of globalization, by Cubans who "quickly mastered and exported" the game to "other Caribbean islands including, by 1891, the Dominican Republic" (Klein, 1995, 114). Throughout the early 20th century, baseball remained racially segregated in the US. This policy of racial segregation led to a "reverse migration" of "black and white players from the United States" who "began playing winter baseball in Latin America," including in Cuba and the DR (Klein, 1995, 114). Black players who were prohibited from playing professional baseball in the US were otherwise able to participate in the game in

Latin American countries, which helped strengthen both interpersonal and political ties. Klein argues that “this reverse labor migration, fostered by racial segregation and economic opportunity, did much to pave the ideological and cultural way for racial integration in major league baseball” (Klein, 1995, 114). Given what was already a strong tie between the US and the DR, as detailed in the previous section, these winter baseball games were, perhaps, the first instance of baseball diplomacy exercised in the DR. By successfully bringing together diverse groups of men with different cultural, ethnic, economic, and social backgrounds, winter baseball games in the DR showed that Americans and Dominicans had much in common, and that the countries could collaborate, effectively problem solving a racial issue in American politics.

Klein writes that “Latinos were converting US ethnocentrism and exclusion into a cultural tradition of their own” (Klein, 1995, 115). In this sense, Dominicans took something that was distinctly American and decided to own it, making it their favorite pastime as well. This adoption of an American sport, in a country that had been largely living under American rule, demonstrates the complexity involved in being a colonial subject. On the one hand, many Dominicans wished to be free from domination or influence from any kind of imperial or colonial power, and with good reason. On the other hand, the Dominican embrace of baseball demonstrates how, on a person-to-person level, there is often much more room for connection. With the exchange of baseball between US Marines and Dominican citizens in 1916 through 1924, scholar Andrew Mitchel writes, “baseball served as a common ground between the occupied and the occupying during this period of intervention, and it offered the opportunity for the Dominicans to beat the Americans” (Mitchel, 2021). Baseball offered American soldiers and Dominican citizens to meet each other not as political subjects but instead just as regular, everyday people—individuals who could share in the joys of the game. These relations were not

always amicable. For example, “Dominican player ‘Fellito’ Guerra...was offered a contract with an American team,” however he “turned down the offer to protest the US invasion of his nation” (Mitchel, 2021). Despite Guerra’s decline to sign the contract, this instance still demonstrates baseball’s diplomatic effect, as the US had invited Guerra to come play in the US, which would involve immigrating to the US. Therefore, the US saw value in allowing Guerra a pathway toward permanent residency and a full participation in American life. Baseball in the DR allowed Dominicans to find joy in American culture and values and to adopt them into their own homes and lifestyles.

In 1946, American baseball teams finally ended practices and policies of segregation, which involved opening up opportunities for Latin American players to join their teams (Klein, 1995, 116). Further, in 1962, after the US embargo on Cuba, the supply of Cuban players available to the US vanished overnight. Although Cuba maintained a large pool of incredible talent, suddenly the door to that talent had closed without any signs of reopening. An unintended, yet extremely impactful, consequence of the Cuban embargo was that “Major League Baseball, Inc. turned its attention to the Dominican Republic and other Latin American countries” (Klein, 1995, 116). According to Klein, “what began as a trickle in the 1950s with the appearance in the major leagues of Dominican Ozzie Virgil has become a torrent,” with the DR contributing 45 players to MLB teams in the 1991 season, numbers which have only continued to increase over the past 30 years (Klein, 1995, 116). Starting in the 1970s, “scouts from nearly every major league team could be found scouring the Dominican Republic” (Klein, 1995, 118). MLB’s scouting efforts led to the creation of baseball academies, which serve as training grounds that generate pipelines for young talent to be developed and honed in Latin America, especially in the DR. MLB, through its strong presence in the DR both through its academies and through the

popularity of its teams, and the many personal connections Dominican families have to them, has behaved as a diplomatic non-state actor to advance US-DR relations in the past half century.

Beginning in the late 1970s, the Toronto Blue Jays and the Los Angeles Dodgers developed what are called “baseball academies” that work to “locate, sign, and begin to refine talent within the Dominican Republic for further development in North America” (Klein, 1995, 119). Baseball academies are the primary site where baseball players undergo transformation from individuals into professional players who occupy the economic role of both producer and commodity. It is interesting to note that academies only really took off in the Dominican Republic as a direct result of Cuban-American political tensions. Klein writes that, due to the Cuban embargo in the 1960s, “several clubs envisioned the Dominican Republic as picking up the slack and providing significant numbers of players. This prompted a reworking of the relationship between MLB organizations and Dominican baseball begun in 1951” (Klein, 2014, 37). This political history between the United States and Cuba helps illuminate why the Dominican Republic is the largest producer of professional baseball players outside the United States (Elidrissi, 2023). As the academies are the primary economic and cultural site where players are produced, examining their structure and function demonstrates the ways in which they serve as a key site of baseball diplomatic strategy.

As of 2023, all 30 Major League Baseball teams have their own academies operating in the Dominican Republic (Stanley, 2023). This number, the fact that every single Major League Baseball team, has its own academy in the Dominican Republic speaks to the value that they generate for each team, and highlights the immense diplomatic promise in Dominican baseball. These baseball academies and players may share a goal, which is “to form/become major leaguers,” and ultimately the academies serve as a huge source of potential income for MLB as a

business and for future MLB players (Klein, 2014, 47). The process of forming major league talent is an ideal site of political and cultural ideological expression. Given that the baseball academies recruit talent when they are young, and often many academies provide an education in addition to preparing players for the major leagues, the academies provide a unique opportunity for diplomacy between the US and DR. Through the academies, MLB is able to teach young players about American values, and, in a certain way, to indoctrinate them into American culture. Even though many players who go through the academies do not make it to MLB, they have still received a thorough education in American cultural, social, and political ethics and values, and have honed a set of skills that forever unites them with the US. In this way, the academies are a major site for the US, through MLB's strong presence in the DR, to indirectly exert its political messages and to persuade young people to align with the US.

Klein goes so far as to say that MLB has “brought the Dominican Republic into its family (Klein, 2014, 34). To say that the Dominican Republic is part of MLB's “family” shows how close and how important the relationship truly is between the DR and MLB, that it extends beyond even the description of a traditional working relationship. Often in political language and political theory, states use the language of family to describe close relationships—describing a country's citizens as one large family, for example. For MLB to include the entire country of the DR in its “family” shows how effective baseball diplomacy has been for the US with the case of the DR. Like in any family, the relationship between the Dominican Republic and MLB contains disagreements and tensions as different entities have different recommendations for how different situations might best be handled, and they do not always see eye to eye on shared issues.

Although baseball academies offer education, training, and services to young men far beyond what they would receive in a typical school setting, there are also downsides to an academy model that are important to examine as well. Baseball academies provide a huge investment into young baseball talent in the Dominican Republic, and provide young men with the opportunity to reach higher levels of professional success that most could only dream of. In a country like the Dominican Republic, with relatively poor economic outcomes for most individuals and families, programs like the baseball academies can feel like a major pathway for many toward better, more hopeful futures. At the same time, however, many players who enter the academies will never be recruited to play for Major League Baseball, and instead will, in a certain way, be discarded from the process in the form of surplus labor. Surplus labor is labor that is no longer necessary to keep a system functioning at its desired levels. What about the players who do succeed and make it to Major League Baseball? Are their experiences entirely positive?

There is a lack of literature from the perspective of actual Major League Baseball players who come from the Dominican Republic or other foreign countries. Research on baseball academies, and the intersection of politics and sports more generally, is relatively new, and so many gaps in the literature still exist today. Therefore, it is difficult to know whether the rare players who do make it out of their home countries like the Dominican Republic, where there is little opportunity, and who make it to the Major League, are content and feel that their experience was positive.

### US-Dominican Relations in the 21st Century

In 2023, Jorge Torres, who serves as the Technical Director for the Dominican Republic Baseball League said “there is something here that occurs from the moment a child is born, and it is that the father says, ‘A baseball player was born’” (Stanley, 2023). As of the 2023 MLB season, 104 players hail from the DR, “the most for any country outside of the United States and 11% of the entire MLB” (Stanley, 2023). These figures are undeniably striking. The entire population of the nation of the DR is only 3% of the size of the US population, and yet Dominican players comprise such a disproportionate percentage of overall MLB players (Stanley, 2023). From the perspective of rationalist theory—of players making decisions that best benefit their desired outcomes—if joining MLB teams were not beneficial to Dominican players, then that would be widely known throughout the baseball academies, and such a large percentage of players would not come from the DR to play in the US. From this perspective, MLB academies are incredibly successful at marketing a strong image of the US to potential players, and toward enticing them to move to the US to better their lives and economic opportunities. According to Klein, “unlike other forms of entertainment, in which thousands struggle with little chance of success, Dominican baseball enables as many as 1,000 men to earn a living from the game and fewer substantial visibility and dramatic success” (Klein, 1995, 123). Therefore, it appears that MLB has created a sustainable model that has several main positive benefits: economic mobility for players, economic success for its business, and, in doing so, it functions as an extremely valuable tool of public diplomacy: the game of baseball sells the brand of America better than any state official could.

When many Dominicans count “the most successful countrymen in the US major leagues...among their acquaintances, friends, or family,” that person-to-person diplomacy is at

its most effective (Klein, 1995, 123). Personal endorsements and recommendations often carry more weight than messages that arrive from more anonymous, or more removed, sources. When many Dominicans can personally attest to the success of MLB academies, and the ways in which they've improved the lives of their loved ones, that endorsement carries immense weight in validating the strength of American culture and values, making it something to be sought after, competed for, and desired.

With the strong presence of MLB, baseball academies, and a shared love of playing and watching baseball, the US has many tools of baseball diplomacy in its toolkit of soft power. In exchange, we see many positive diplomatic and policy outcomes for the US and the DR. The US Department of State recognizes that "US relations with the Dominican Republic are productive and wide-ranging" (United States Department of State, 2023). The US is currently the "leading foreign investor" in the DR, and the US provides security assistance to the DR through the "Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI)," which aims to prevent illegal trafficking and transnational crime, and also "benefits from the US-Caribbean Partnership to Address the Climate Crisis (PACC 2023)" (United States Department of State, 2023). These policies provide tangible benefits to both the US and the DR, working to further strengthen the already uniquely strong bond these states share. Although baseball is not explicitly mentioned by the US Department of State as a diplomatic strategy, or a shared cultural value, by examining the history of US-Dominican relations as I did above, it is impossible to ignore the key ways in which baseball served to bring together Americans and Dominicans in ways that allowed for the creation of an extremely close-knit, successful allegiance and economic partnership.



## Conclusion

The world is arguably more interconnected today than ever before. Through the rise of the internet, technological advancements of all kinds, including innovations in transit and the popularity of smartphones, and the rapid development of many historically underdeveloped states in the past century—the exchange of ideas and images has never happened more quickly or more easily. These developments have also brought about change in the ways in which states should conduct diplomacy. Historically, diplomacy was left to professionals. Diplomats worked for their respective home countries and represented them in the international arena with the endorsement of their home country's state department. In this way, diplomacy was a very formal process that only occurred in professional spaces between official representatives. Today, however, as a result of the increasing interconnectedness between states, diplomacy can take many shapes—some of which appear more informal, but are equally impactful, as traditional diplomacy has been.

Increased access to technology has meant that borders between states are, in a sense, less important than they ever were. With new technologies, information is able to travel between and across borders at an extremely quick pace. With this, states have had to adopt new strategies to address issues that are emerging and being communicated to the public mostly in real time. According to Nye, “smart power” refers to the diplomatic strategy of combining hard power and soft power in order to exercise the highest level of influence over another state. Public diplomacy—which we can think of as a diplomatic process conducted by non-state actors such as corporations and NGOs—is one means by which countries can exercise soft power strategically in the current age. As borders have decreased in their importance in the political process and in

international affairs, the internet, which is a borderless space, has become increasingly influential—some would say as influential as many states, and exists as a place where many non-state actors can come together and exercise influence over diverse populations all over the globe instantly.

The work of this project has been to show that baseball diplomacy is a theoretical framework that can apply to any country where baseball is played, watched, or enjoyed in any capacity. Baseball diplomacy is not limited to the two cases that this project tried to examine, and instead can be applied to other countries' relationships with the US and with each other. While baseball diplomacy has not been able to transform the strength of political relationships in all cases, like Cuba, it has proven to be successful, in cases like the DR, to bring American values to a foreign country and to import them with pride and widespread adoption.

Baseball diplomacy, which can be defined as a type of public diplomacy that leverages the influence of MLB, of the sport as a means of connecting amateurs who play for fun, of players who immigrate around the world, and of fans who watch local games in their hometowns and stream professional games on TV or online—is especially well suited to the current moment as a tool of soft power. Tensions between states only seem to continue increasing, and baseball, like many other sports, has been proven to be a way to bring people together and foster interconnection for over 150 years. Baseball, with a universal set of rules that applies no matter where you are in the world, allows people to connect beyond any language barriers that might separate them—you only need to know the rules of the game to be able to play, or to watch, and understand what is going on. Celebrating wins and feeling the weight of losses is a universal feeling that everyone can relate to, no matter where you were born or who you are. Due to globalization and the ways in which it has made connecting online and accessing new

information easier than ever, more people around the world are primed to tune into a MLB game, or to find other locals who might want to play an intramural game after work.

MLB maintains a large social media presence and has accounts on every major platform, including in multiple languages. MLB's Instagram account has over 10.9 million followers (@MLB, 2024). The Spanish language Instagram account for MLB, for example, called "Las Mayores" maintains over 1.4 million followers as of 2024 (@LasMayores, 2024). Not only do the huge followings on these accounts, especially the Las Mayores account, signal the possibility for future research, they also illustrate the current success of baseball diplomacy by quantifying the massive popularity of MLB within Latin American countries. Many commentators also maintain their own public profiles on X, formerly known as Twitter, as well as Instagram and TikTok. Both MLB as a brand, as well as individual players, commentators, and other public figures associated with MLB are able to act as diplomats online, serving to connect people in an increasingly disconnected world. These brands and figures act as unofficial diplomatic representatives of their home countries, working to promote the values that the sport of baseball has at its core: hard work, independence, upward mobility, and hope.

While the literature on sports diplomacy in general is very limited, and baseball diplomacy even more limited, there is a ton of room for new research to take place that would help fill in the gaps and further illuminate the ways in which baseball serves as a means of connecting people and promoting American values, in particular, across the globe. Although this project looked specifically at Cuba and the DR due to their similar size and geographic region, as well as the fact that baseball grew in both countries starting around the same time, there is ample room for additional research to take place in other countries around the world, as MLB continues to grow its international brand and audience. Cuba, where baseball diplomacy floundered

historically, but where there is great potential for future success, and the DR, where baseball diplomacy has succeeded immensely across history, and has room to continue to expand its power, are just a starting point for additional research to be done. For example, the first professional league located in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) just began in 2022, called “Baseball United” and is looking to “tap into a potential market of nearly 2 billion people” (Wright, 2024). This new professional league will reach a huge swath of the global population, and given the numerous tensions that exist within the region, it would be interesting to study the ways in which this sport, which is new to the region, can further serve to ease tensions and bring people together.

Baseball has existed almost as long in Japan as it has in Cuba and the DR, and was first introduced to Japan by an American professor in 1872 (Adler, 2023). Today, baseball is the most popular sport in Japan, a country of over 123 million people, with the fourth largest global economy, and a GDP of 4.232 trillion dollars as of 2022 (Toyoda et. al., 2024). Japan would make for an excellent case study of baseball diplomacy, as it presents a completely different economic landscape to study than the cases present in this paper. Japan, unlike Cuba and the DR, is not at all a developing country and is one of the leading industrialized nations in the world when it comes to technology, transit, and innovation. Additionally, the US and Japan have had a rocky history diplomatically. During World War II, Japanese internment camps in the US, and the deployment of the atomic bomb, among other factors, all greatly damaged America’s reputation with the Japanese. Due to these extreme and specific historical events, I would recommend that the US and Japan’s history of baseball diplomacy be performed as a single case study, rather than a comparative one, as there are no other countries that really compare in a fair manner.

It would be advantageous for scholars to examine the ways in which social media has opened up new channels for public diplomacy in general, and baseball diplomacy in particular. As mentioned above, MLB and its players maintain a strong presence on social media. For example, Shohei Ohtani of the Los Angeles Dodgers, has over 7.9 million followers on Instagram, while Mike Trout of the Los Angeles Angels has over 2.3 million Instagram followers (Fan Arch, 2024). With these massive audiences literally in the palm of your hand, along with the ability to send out information instantly to people around the world, social media accounts of players, teams, and MLB generate completely new ways of diplomacy and values-sharing to take place all from the comfort of home. Social media and the unique ways that it generates instant global connections around the world might even benefit from a new theory of diplomacy, or might contribute to an expanded definition of public diplomacy, that factors in how the internet behaves in many ways like a state, or a physical place.

Lastly, while this thesis provides a theoretical and qualitative investigation into baseball's history and its role in diplomacy in the case of Cuba and the DR, the literature would be strengthened by additional economic or quantitative research on the question of how baseball serves as a means of bringing people together and promoting values such as peace, democracy, and connection. Metrics such as views of MLB games by country, engagement with players, brands, and teams on social media, as well as an economic analysis of the performance of MLB, would illuminate a totally different side of this research question and would provide great insight into the ways in which the circulation of money impacts the effectiveness of baseball as a diplomatic tool.



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