

**Bush-League America:
Conservatism and Cosmopolitanism in
American Baseball and Politics**

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bush' league', *Baseball*. See **minor league**. [1905–10, *Amer.*]

bush-league (boosh'lēg'), *adj.* inferior or amateurish; mediocre: *a bush-league theatrical performance*. [1905–10, *Amer.*]

bush' lea'guer, **1.** Also called **busher**. *Baseball*. **a.** a player in a minor league. **b.** an incompetent player, as one who behaves or plays as if he or she belonged in a minor league. **2.** a person who performs at an inferior level or in an inferior manner. [1905–10, *Amer.*]

Random House Unabridged Dictionary, Second Edition

“There are a lot of parallels between baseball and politics.”

George W. Bush (*Time*, July 31, 1989)

AS THEY WAITED eagerly for George W. Bush to stride onto a newly constructed thrust stage at New York's Madison Square Garden, the delegates at the 2004 Republican National Convention were treated to a seven-minute video biography of the man they hoped to re-elect to the presidency of the United States. Written by Peggy Noonan, the former Reagan and Bush speechwriter who crafted Bush *pere's* famous

“Thousand Points of Light” speech, the video adopted the documentary style made popular by Ken Burns’s nine-part film *Baseball* (1994). It featured a camera-eye zooming and panning across still images, accompanied by sentimental music and narrated in a gravelly, folksy voice by the actor Fred Dalton Thompson, a former U.S. Senator and who is now mentioned frequently in the press as a possible presidential candidate. The video astutely focused on what may well be remembered as the two finest moments of Bush’s presidency.

The first, documented in widely circulated photograph, occurred when Bush visited Ground Zero in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001. The photograph shows Bush with a bullhorn standing next to a white-haired fireman atop a pile of rubble (*Figure 1*).

But the video wasn’t called “Ground Zero” or “The Man with the Bullhorn.” It was called “The Pitch: Convention Biography of President George W. Bush,” and that’s because the second and more important moment, the moment that is meant to set the stage for Bush’s acceptance speech and to sum up why he should continue to serve as President of the United States, involves a game of baseball.



Figure 1. September 14, 2004: Bush with retired New York City firefighter Bob Beckwith.

Like the visit to Ground Zero, it was a New York moment, taking place at Yankee Stadium just before Game Three of the 2001 World Series, which pitted the New York Yankees against the Arizona Diamondbacks. After telling two brief anecdotes—one about Bush consoling the mother of a policeman who died at the World Trade Center, the other about his running three laps on the South Lawn of the White House with a veteran wounded in Afghanistan who had been fitted with a prosthetic foot—Thompson turned to “The Pitch”:

It’s hard for a picture to capture the presidency. But maybe a story can tell us something about its meaning.

It was October 2001. America had just been hit, and America was uneasy. And some were afraid. He knew.

There was a baseball game, the World Series. And it was held in New York. New York was trying to come back. And he knew.

And, suddenly, the White House was calling the mayor’s office, which was calling Yankee Stadium. It was the first night of the big series in New York. And look who arrived at Yankee Stadium.

Derek Jeter bumped into him before he walked out to the mound, and he said, hey, Mr. President, where are you going to throw from?

The president said, “Hadn’t thought about it. Guess the base of the mound.”

And Derek Jeter said, “This is New York. And in New York, you throw from the mound.”

And the president laughed. He was wearing a heavy Secret Service bulletproof vest and he could hardly move his arms. But he knew.

So George Bush took the mound. What he did that night, that man in the arena, he helped us come back.

That’s the story of this presidency.

With the heart of a president, he told us, you keep pitching. No matter what, you keep pitching. No matter what, you go to the game. You go to the mound. You find the plate, and you throw, and you become who you are.



Figure 2: October 3, 2001: Bush throws out the ceremonial first pitch before game three of the World Series between the Arizona Diamondbacks and the Yankees at Yankee Stadium. (White House photo by Eric Draper).

At the word “mound,” the video suddenly changes its syntax? It moves from still image to film, and we see Bush throw the pitch, then watch it flutter toward the plate in slow motion and finally land in the catcher’s mitt, an apparent strike. The change in syntax emphasizes the importance of the moment and lures us into its sentimentality.

At several points in the video, Thompson describes Bush with the refrain, “He just rose to the occasion. Just about everybody did those days.” What Thompson doesn’t mention is that the last time Bush had tried his hand at a ceremonial first pitch, for the opening of Milwaukee’s Miller Park the previous April, he had bounced the ball in the dirt in front of the plate.

In the weeks that followed 9/11, Bush became the very image of a compassionate leader, rallying a shaken nation and then leading the country into a war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda that had both domestic and international support. According to a poll conducted by the *New York Times* between October 25 and 28, Bush’s job approval rating was near its all-time high, with 87% of those polled approving of “the way George W. Bush is handling his job as President.”

The next time that Bush threw out a ceremonial first pitch was in St. Louis’s Busch Memorial Stadium on April 5, 2004, opening day for the Cardinals. The Associated Press reported later in the day that “President Bush is getting the hang of throwing out first pitches. He tossed one in from the mound at Busch Stadium Monday, ceremonially opening the 2004 Major League Baseball season, and the catcher hardly had to move his mitt,” quite a change from three years earlier in Milwaukee’s Miller Park when Bush’s “opening-day pitch . . . ended up in the dirt.” Afterwards, in a televised interview, Bush told Cardinals’ announcer Joe Buck, “I’ve done a lot of exciting things since I’ve been the president, but standing out here in Busch Stadium is one of the exciting ones.”

When Buck asked Bush about the importance of baseball in American life, Bush replied, “It’s the kind of game that brings people together. All political parties, all occupations, all walks of life can root for the home team. Baseball is a very important part of the social fabric of this country. That’s one reason Laura and I are hosting T-ball games on the White House lawn, because we want baseball to be vibrant and strong throughout the generations.”

Bush’s visit to St. Louis did not make the various evening news broadcasts that night, which were preoccupied not with balls and strikes, but rather with troop movements and air-strikes in a town called Fallujah in Iraq.

Between those two pitches—the one in New York and the one in St. Louis two-and-a-half years later—a lot had changed in the world. Gone was the feeling of unity and togetherness that so many Americans felt after the 9/11 attacks. Gone was the sympathy and good will extended to the U.S. by so many nations in the aftermath of that tragedy; in its place were suspicion, dread, and revulsion as the U.S. became embroiled in a war in Iraq that was clearly far from over and was certainly not the victory for the U.S. that Bush had announced aboard the U.S.S. Lincoln in May 2003 with the words “Mission Accomplished.” By April 2004, Bush’s approval rating had slipped to 49%.

THROUGHOUT his political career, George W. Bush has cloaked himself with the cultural mythology that has arisen around the game and the institution of baseball in the United States. In his autobiography and in countless interviews and speeches, Bush has used imagery drawn from baseball to help him establish both his political credentials and his image as a man of the people. Baseball has also had an actual, material impact on Bush’s career: it was his stint as managing partner of the Texas Rangers that enabled him to represent himself as a successful businessman and to establish himself as a credible challenger to Ann Richards for the governorship of Texas, which became his springboard to the presidency.

Bush’s autobiography, *A Charge To Keep* (1999), is littered with anecdotes and thoughts about the game. Recalling his youth, Bush writes, “I filled many of my days with baseball. Although I was born in New Haven, Connecticut, while my dad was an undergraduate at Yale, we moved to West Texas when I was two. My first memories are of Midland, and when I think of growing up there, baseball comes to mind first.” In May 2000, *Time* magazine ran a piece entitled “Diamonds Are for Bush”; its sub-head declared, “Baseball is George W.’s great passion. It’s what he is most confident about. And it’s a key to understanding him.” After describing the baseball memorabilia that could be found in Bush’s office in Austin Texas, including 250 baseballs “collected since Bush was a child,” the article describes Bush’s near-religious feeling for the game:

The son and grandson of Yale baseball-team captains, Bush learned from his mother the special hieroglyphics that aficionados use to keep score.

He knows the statistics and anecdotes of the game the way Bill Clinton knows welfare reform. Baseball, it seems, reveals a truth about Bush: when engaged, he plunges in heart and soul.

And in the fourteenth chapter of *A Charge To Keep*, which is titled, simply, "Baseball," Bush waxes poetic about what the game means to him, as he describes how he came to become the managing partner of a Major League Baseball team, the Texas Rangers: "I didn't intend it or think about it at the time," he writes, "but in retrospect, baseball was a great training ground for politics and government. . . . We succeeded in baseball because we had a vision and a message. From baseball I developed a thick skin against criticism. I learned to overlook minor setbacks and focus on the long haul."

My goal today is to explore the relationship between George W. Bush and baseball discourse. This discourse exists as a web of associations in which a variety of different forms of thought and expression are linked together. These forms include logical arguments about the theory and practice of the game, but also such genres as history, personal narrative, sportswriting, poems, novels, and films. Baseball discourse creates a specialized vocabulary that includes both the game's technical terms and its slang; it also creates its own iconography, a set of images and symbols that embody and reinforce its practices.

My goal, therefore, is to investigate not only the sport itself, but also (and perhaps more importantly) the way in which Americans talk and write about the sport. Baseball discourse tells us something about baseball, but it also tells us something about the nature of the culture that has enshrined it as its so-called national pastime. And, I believe, because George W. Bush has so often used this discourse as a touchstone in presenting himself and his ideas, it can tell us something about Bush and the particular brand of conservatism that he embodies.

The idea that we can learn something about U.S. culture by learning something about U.S. baseball was articulated most famously by the cultural critic Jacques Barzun in 1954, when he wrote, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game" (*God's Country and Mine* 159). A quarter-century later, A. Bartlett Giamatti, the man who left the presidency of

Yale University for the presidency of the National League and eventually became Commissioner of Baseball, rephrased Barzun's insight with double-edged puns that captured the ambivalences of late twentieth-century U.S. culture. "I believe that thinking about baseball will tell us a lot about ourselves as a people," he wrote in his posthumously published book *Take Time for Paradise* (1989). "Baseball is part of America's plot, part of America's mysterious, underlying design – the plot in which we all conspire and collude, the plot of the story of our national life" (83).

That plot, in Giamatti's view, revolves around the idea of individualism. In a speech delivered before the Massachusetts Historical Society shortly before he became Commissioner of Baseball, Giamatti claimed that "baseball fits America so well because it embodies the interplay of individual and group that we love, and because it expresses our longing for the rule of law while licensing our resentment of law givers."¹ In *Take Time For Paradise*, Giamatti speculates that baseball had become America's national pastime because "we cherish as Americans a game wherein freedom and reunion are both possible. Baseball fulfills the promise America made itself to cherish the individual while recognizing the overarching claims of the group. It sends its players out in order to return again, allowing all the freedom to accomplish great things in a dangerous world. So baseball restates a version of America's promises every time it is played. The playing of the game is a restatement of the promises that we can all be free, that we can all succeed."² Giamatti stressed that at the heart of the game lies "the basic confrontation between two lone individuals. It is primitive in its starkness. A man on a hill prepares to throw a rock at a man slightly below him, not far away, who holds a club." To step up to the plate is to step up to the brink of fear, because "no one knows where the pitched ball, or hit ball, will go. Most of the time, control, agility, timing, planning avert brutality and force sport. Occasionally, suddenly, usually unaccountably the primitive act of throwing results in terrible injury. The fear that randomness will take over is never absent. If hitting a major league fastball is the most difficult act in professional sport, the difficulty derives from the need to overcome fear in a split second." Moreover, Giamatti asserts, because "players are sufficiently separated on the field . . . they cannot hide from responsibility in a crowd, as in football or Congress." For these reasons, Giamatti

declares that “individual merit and self-reliance are the bedrock of baseball.”³

Giamatti’s lectures about baseball are full of such Emersonian moments, a tribute to the way in which Emerson’s language has saturated the discourse of individualism in America, since Giamatti considered himself to be a critic of Emersonianism. Unlike Emerson, Giamatti appreciates individualism not for its own sake but only insofar as it nurtures communal values. What he admires in baseball is “a capacity to cherish individuality and inspire cohesion in a way which is a hallmark of our loftiest free institutions.” The logic of baseball, in Giamatti’s view, begins with the individual but culminates in the team:

while the premium on individual effort is never lost, the communal choreography of the team eventually takes over. Every assigned role on the field potentially can and often does change with every pitch, and with each kind of pitch, or with each ball hit fair. The subsequent interactions among all the players on the field expand in incalculable ways. When in the thrall of these communal aspects, hitting, stealing a base, and individual initiative give way to collective playmaking, acts of sacrifice or cooperation, and obedience to signs and orders. Whether on offense or defense, the virtuoso is subsumed into the ensemble. The anarchic ways of solo operators are subdued by a free institution.⁴

In 1989, Giamatti put these abstract ideas into practice by expunging a solo operator whose egotism threatened to undermine the credibility and integrity of baseball as an institution. After banishing Pete Rose, who was accused of betting on professional baseball games involving the team that he was managing, Giamatti declared, “Let no one think that it did not hurt baseball. That hurt will pass, however, as the great glory of the game asserts itself and a resilient institution goes forward. Let it also be clear that no individual is superior to the game.”⁵

When Giamatti valorizes “baseball’s vast, stable body of rules” because it “ensures competitive balance in the game and shows forth a

country devoted to equality of treatment and opportunity,” when he speaks of the loftiness of America’s “free institutions,” his words sound uncannily similar to the campaign rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and George Bush senior – despite all his criticisms of the manner in which the United States was governed during the 1980s.⁶ Reagan often described “the dream conceived by our Founding Fathers” as the achievement of “the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with an orderly society,” and he based his politics upon an ideology of individualism. In 1977, he declared “that the preservation and enhancement of the values that strengthen and protect individual freedom, family life, communities, and neighborhoods and the liberty of our beloved nation should be at the heart of any legislative or political program presented to the American people,” and in his first inaugural address, he claimed that Americans had “prospered as no other people on earth,” because they had “unleashed the energy and individual genius of man to a greater extent than has ever been done before. Freedom and the dignity of the individual have been more available and assured here than in any other place on earth. The price for this freedom at times has been high, but we have never been unwilling to pay that price.”⁷

George Bush senior also deployed this cultural logic when describing his “philosophy” in 1988: “At the bright center is the individual. And radiating out from him or her is the family, the essential unit of closeness and of love. . . . From the individual to the family to the community, and on out to the town, to the church and school and, still echoing out, to the county, the state, the nation – each doing only what it does well, and no more. And I believe that power must always be kept close to the individual, close to the hands that raise the family and run the home.” Bush inverts Alexis de Tocqueville’s formulation of the relationship between individual and community. Tocqueville maintained that individualism “disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of his family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after himself.” The logic of Bush’s rhetoric says, in effect, “If each individual looks after himself, his family, and his friends, then the greater society is, in fact, looking after itself.” Individualism does not “merge in egoism” or “dam the spring of public virtues” as Tocqueville suggested;

rather, it becomes, first, self-fulfillment, then selflessness, and thus the source of all public virtues. “We celebrated the individual,” Bush says, “but we weren’t self-centered.”⁸

Emerson, Giamatti, Reagan, and Bush all occupy positions on the same ideological field, and the rules of the game played there are dictated by the logic of individualism. A radically different interpretation of the nature of baseball (as well as the nature of society) is not only possible but actually practiced among the Japanese, who also regard the sport as their national pastime and who have been playing organized baseball for almost as long as Americans. If the individual lies at the center of American ideology, it is the group that occupies a corresponding place within the logic of Japanese culture. Specifically, the Japanese identify the concept of *wa*, roughly translated as “group harmony,” as the central principle around which their culture revolves. But *wa* connotes more than simply “harmony”: it is also associated with such qualities as “conciliation, gentleness, accord, accommodation, mellowness, conformity, softness, order, unison, [and] compromise.”⁹ Nevertheless, despite its emphasis on communal values, Japanese culture had no concept of team sport before the mid-nineteenth century; its sports -- such as sumo-wrestling and martial arts -- stressed individual combat. For this reason, it is likely that what appealed to the Japanese about baseball was precisely what Giamatti calls the “primitive starkness” of its “basic confrontation between two lone individuals.” According to the sportswriter Robert Whiting, “The Japanese found the one-on-one battle between pitcher and batter similar in psychology to sumo and the martial arts. It involved split-second timing and a special harmony of mental and physical strength.” At the same time, “baseball provided the Japanese with an opportunity to express their renowned group proclivities on an athletic field. Indeed, over the years . . . it has been the team aspects of the game, the sacrifice bunt, the squeeze, the hit-and-run, that have come to characterize Japanese baseball.” The Japanese concept of *wa* is diametrically opposed to the American concept of individualism. “The U.S. is a land where the hard individualist is honored,” writes Whiting. “The typical American player is one like Darryl Strawberry or Don Mattingly, who lives by the rule ‘I know what’s best for me.’ In Japan, however, the word for individualism, *kojinshugi*, is almost a dirty word.” According to Whiting, “If you asked a Japanese

manager what he considers the most important ingredient of a winning team, he would likely answer *wa*. If you asked him how to knock a team's *wa* awry, he would probably say, 'Hire an American.'"¹⁰

IF INDIVIDUALISM is a recurring feature of baseball discourse, so is the image of fathers and sons playing catch. The poet Donald Hall, who has written extensively about baseball, argues that "baseball is continuous, like nothing else among American things, an endless game of repeated summers, joining the long generations of all the fathers and all the sons." For Hall, what is most important—and most American—about baseball is the timeless way in which it brings fathers and sons together:

Baseball is fathers and sons. Football is brothers beating each other up in the backyard, violent and superficial. Baseball is the generations, looping backward forever with a million apparitions of sticks and balls, cricket and rounders, and the games the Iroquois played in Connecticut before the English came. Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch, lazy and murderous, wild and controlled, the profound archaic song of birth growth, age, and death. This diamond encloses what we are.¹¹

Poetic as Hall's language is, there is no disguising the fact that what he is ultimately celebrating is the perpetuation of patriarchy in America.

In another essay, Hall argues that "baseball connects American males with each other, not only through bleacher friendships and neighbor loyalties, not only through barroom fights but, most importantly, through generations. When you are small, you may not discuss politics or union dues or profit margins with your father's cigar-smoking friends when your father has gone out for a six-pack, but you may discuss baseball."¹² That seems to be a good description of George W. Bush's early years. According to a *Newsweek* profile published in August 2000:

George Bush Sr. freely owns up to being a father of the 1950s, not the '90s. In an interview with *Newsweek* he recalled, "I didn't think, 'Well, I've got to get home tonight to do my stamp

collection with George W’.” Bush Sr. talked plenty about baseball at the dinner table, but rarely, if ever, about politics.

By all accounts, Bush grew up in a family that was nothing if not patriarchal.¹³ He seems to have been eager to please his father, while finding it difficult to follow in his footsteps. Bush Sr., for example, was the captain and starting first baseman of the Yale College baseball team. (His grandfather Prescott Bush had also been captain of the Yale team.) George W. was a far less gifted athlete, who “warmed the bench on the basketball and baseball teams” in prep school (*Newsweek*, 7 August 2000, 32).

In his autobiography, Bush describes a game of catch as one of the most memorable experiences of his youth, a moment in which, finally, he knew that he had secured the respect of his father:

Sometimes, on weekends, my dad would join us, impressing my friends by catching the ball behind his back. Joe O’Neill and the neighborhood boys used to try for hours to imitate Dad, usually succeeding only in getting bruises and scrapes. I played catcher in Little League, and still remember the proud moment when my dad told me, “Son, you’ve arrived. I can throw it to you as hard as I want to.”¹⁴

Are these accounts accurate? Did George Sr. really talk about baseball more than politics at the dinner table? Was a game of catch really one of the most memorable moments of George W.’s youth? We can’t know for sure, but what we do know is that both father and son are crafting a public image that draws on the celebration of male bonding across generations that is one of the hallmarks of baseball discourse.

The Bushes’ rhetoric here uses baseball as a way of subtly legitimating their patriarchal vision of social relations. What, after all, could be more *natural* than a father playing catch with his son? What could be more *American*? So what if this imagery tends to exclude wives, mothers, and daughters? It’s just a metaphor, right?

The linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff has studied the ways in which the metaphors we use actually shape the thoughts we think.

In their classic study *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is not just “a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish,” but is instead “pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” Moreover, the average individual is not “normally aware of” the functioning of his or her “ordinary conceptual system.” It functions automatically, unconsciously. We might use a baseball metaphor without really thinking about what that metaphor indicates about the way we think. Baseball metaphors have become so prevalent in American speech that we might assume that they are natural and ideologically neutral. But they are, instead, charged with ideological meanings—in this case, the legitimation of patriarchal values.

More recently, Lakoff has used the insights of cognitive science to examine U.S. politics, in particular the seemingly intractable divide between progressives and conservatives in the aftermath of the Reagan era. Lakoff argues that almost all Americans tend to think of the nation in familial terms, to use metaphors drawn from family life to describe the nation, but that they are split between two competing, and largely incompatible, conceptions of what constitutes the ideal family.

Progressive politics, in Lakoff’s analysis, are based on *nurturant* family values:

Both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.¹⁵

In Lakoff’s terms, *nurturance* “means two things: empathy and responsibility.” Children learn to be empathetic and responsible because they see these qualities demonstrated by their parents:

Children develop best through their positive relationships to others, through their contribution to their community,

and through the ways in which they realize their potential and find joy in life. Children become responsible, self-disciplined, and self-reliant through being cared for and respect, and through caring for others. Support and protection are part of nurturance, and they require strength and courage on the part of parents. The obedience of children comes out of their love and respect for their parents, not out of the fear of punishment.

These ideas can be translated into political programs in different ways: Lakoff describes six different varieties of progressive politics, “each with a distinct mode of thought,” but all sharing the basic values of the “nurturant parent morality.” Most progressives believe in the importance of self-reliance, but believe it is best learned through interactions with others.

For conservatives like George W. Bush and his true political father, Ronald Reagan, self-reliance is the paramount value, and they adopt a rather different morality based on a radically different model of family values. Lakoff calls it the “strict father model” and argues that it “begins with a set of assumptions”:

The world is a dangerous place, and it always will be, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

What is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

Protect the family in the dangerous world,
Support the family in the difficult world, and
Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience—that is, right from wrong—is through punishment, painful

punishment when they do wrong. (*Elephant 7*)

The strict father model sees the world as the kind of “war of all against all” that Thomas Hobbes described in his treatise *Leviathan* (1651), written in the aftermath of the English Civil War (1642-1651) and intended to provide a philosophical justification for the absolute power of a sovereign. In the state of nature that exists before civil society is formed, “the life of man,” according to Hobbes, is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” For Hobbes, competition is a chief characteristic of the state of nature, and it is deadly: “Competition of riches, honour, command, or other power inclineth to contention, enmity, and war, because the way of one competitor to the attaining of his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other.”¹⁶ Civil society preserves competition but allows it to be regulated by the sovereign through the mechanism of the law.

Indeed, for conservatives, competition is one aspect of the state of nature that must be preserved in a civilized, moral society. Believing human beings to be, by nature, amoral, conservatives view competition as a crucial ingredient in their moral system, because (as Lakoff puts it) “it is through competition that we discover who is moral, that is, who has been properly self-disciplined and therefore deserves success, and who is fit enough to survive and even thrive in a difficult world.”¹⁷ The role of the strict father is to impose discipline upon his children until the desire for discipline is internalized and becomes self-discipline. “Children must respect and obey their parents,” Lakoff writes, because “by doing so they build character, that is, self-discipline and self-reliance.”¹⁸ The pursuit, not of happiness, but of self-reliance is thus the bedrock of the strict-father ideology that underwrites the politics of conservatives like George W. Bush.¹⁹

With its basis in competition, baseball discourse provides a way to invoke strict father ideology in a way that makes it seem not punishing but uplifting, that links it to summer days and green grass and the thrill of victory. The emphasis on individualism that I described earlier makes baseball more suitable as an emblem for strict father ideology than other team sports such as football or basketball. Moreover, because it is still a commonplace that baseball is “the national pastime” and the most “American” of sports, baseball discourse can further legitimate strict-

father ideology by making the ideology seem to be an expression of the same sorts of traditional “American” values embodied by baseball.

Each of the ideologies that Lakoff describes produces its own way of “framing” ideas. In his terminology,

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions. In politics are frames shape our social policies and the institutions we form to carry out policies.

Frames are powerful precisely because they are part of the *cognitive unconscious*, which Lakoff describes as “structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense.” In addition, frames work through language. “All words,” writes Lakoff, “are defined relative to conceptual frames. When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain.”²⁰

So when a commentator uses the term “hardball” to describe a politician’s approach, it means than simply the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition of “tough, uncompromising dealings or activity (esp. in political contexts).” “Hardball” brings with it a host of associations drawn from the discourse surrounding baseball. “Hardball” is a man’s game, as opposed to “softball,” which is played by children and women. (And, so, giving someone a “softball” question during an interview means taking it easy on him or her.) “Hardball” conjures up the hardness of the ball, the distinctive crack of a bat or glove when the ball hits it, the smack into the glove, and the courage needed to face a high and inside 90-m.p.h. fastball. “Hardball” is a way of framing a set of activities: it’s nasty but you’ve got to admire it, and you’ve got to admire it because unconsciously you are associating that set of activities with the great old American game of baseball.

Frames are powerful and tenacious because they work through the unconscious. “The strict father and nurturing parent frames each force a certain logic,” writes Lakoff. “To be accepted, the truth must fit people’s frames. If the facts do not fit a frame, the frame stays and the facts bounce

off” (*Elephant* 17). The current U.S. predicament in Iraq is a direct result, I think, of the way in which the events of 9/11 were framed *for* George W. Bush by his unconscious and framed *by* George W. Bush for the American people. It is not surprising, given Bush’s reliance on strict-father ideology, his own relationship to his father, and his dissatisfaction with the results of the Gulf War, that he and the members of his administration would decide to invade Iraq rather than focus their attention on the threat posed directly by al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bush and his people fell victim to faulty intelligence because they were too eager to believe in a prefabricated script in which U.N. sanctions had failed to keep Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction, which he would eventually share with terrorists groups like al Qaeda. Even after the Duelfer report concluded in September 2004 that Iraq had no large-scale programs to make illicit weapons and posed no “imminent or urgent” threat, the Bush administration’s framing of the war resisted the implications of these new facts.²¹ Instead, Bush continued to insist that he had pursued the right course in the right way. The *New York Times* noted, a few days after the Duelfer story broke, that “Bush still declines to even acknowledge the disastrous condition the war has fallen into, preferring simply to assert over and over that the course there is now firmly set for a democratic and stable future. Democrats who question these Pollyannaish projections are almost instantly slapped down as unpatriotic underminers of military morale.”²²

The Bush presidency exhibits a notable failure of the imagination, an inability to think beyond the frame of its strict father ideology. The political scientist Paul Kengor notes that Bush never claimed “that the Almighty told him to send in the marines.” Instead, according to Kengor, Bush “believes that God has implanted a desire for freedom in all human hearts”; in addition, Bush seems to subscribe to “a theory popular in the academic field of international relations in the 1990’s” called “democratic peace,” according to which “democracies tend not to fight one another.” To establish democracy in Iraq, therefore, is both to do God’s will (by allowing the Iraqis to realize the desire for freedom that God has implanted within them) and to make America safer. As Kengor notes, however, it’s a theory that means fighting experience and history when it

comes to the “Middle Eastern Arab nations, none of which have produced an enviable democracy.”²³

I am reminded of *The Story of Babar, the Little Elephant* (1937) by Jean de Brunhoff, a beloved children’s book that is now often seen as an allegory of colonialism.²⁴ Little Babar’s mother is shot by a white hunter, who then chases after Babar. Babar escapes to the big city, where he meets a kind and rich old woman who cares for him, feeding him and giving him clothes. Indeed, it is the experience of shopping that seems to have the greatest impact on the young elephant. When Babar returns to the jungle, driving a car and wearing Western clothes, he finds that the elephants are arguing about who is to succeed their late king. The elephants take one look at Babar and decide that, because of his evident Western expertise, he is the right elephant for the job. So Babar becomes king and before long all of the elephants are wearing western clothes and enjoying the latest mod cons. It is a triumph for Western civilization.

Bush seems to have had something similar in mind in his approach to Iraq. He is unable to imagine what it might be like to be a member of a different culture, a culture that has a long history but little experience with Western democracy. He is unable to imagine people who might not want to adopt Western-democracy (and with it capitalism, materialism, and a lot of other –isms that we take for granted.) Of course the elephants want clothes! And naturally the Iraqis want Western-style democracy. Who wouldn’t?

Bush’s imagination is limited by his strict-father ideology. *U.S. News and World Report* described Bush’s second inauguration “a day for the true believers—the social conservatives, Christian activists, foreign-policy hawks, and, of course, George W. Bush himself.”²⁵ As a true believer, Bush believes that his beliefs are, quite simply, true. He can’t imagine that other, competing beliefs might have truth-value as well. He is what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah would call a “counter-cosmopolitan,” because he doesn’t believe in “what philosophers call *fallibilism* – the sense that our knowledge is imperfect, provisional, subject to revision in the face of new evidence” (*Cosmopolitanism* 144).

I am reminded, too, of the umpire joke. It goes like this. Three umpires are discussing their craft over a beer after a game. The first umpire says,

“Balls are balls, strikes are strikes, and I calls ’em as I sees ’em.” The second umpire offers a different perspective: “Balls are balls, and strikes are strikes, and I calls ’em as they are.” The third umpire looks at the other two and shakes his head: “Balls are balls, and strikes are strikes. But nothin’ ain’t nothin’ until I calls ’em.”

This is not just a joke about baseball: it is also a joke about epistemology, the branch of philosophy that concerns the nature of knowledge, that investigates how we know what we know and what the nature of our knowledge is—or can be.

The first two umpires believe in an objective reality in which there are balls and strikes, as defined by the rules of baseball, and the two are utterly distinct. A ball is “a pitch which does not enter the strike zone in flight and is not struck at by the batter,” and the strike zone is “that area over home plate the upper limit of which is a horizontal line at the midpoint between the top of the shoulders and the top of the uniform pants, and the lower level is a line at the hollow beneath the knee cap.” According to the rules, “the Strike Zone shall be determined from the batter’s stance as the batter is prepared to swing at a pitched ball.” The strike zone is therefore different with each batter and even from pitch to pitch to the same batter, if the batter adjusts his stance. But when a pitch is thrown, there *is* a strike zone, its boundaries can be determined, and a strike is that is either “struck at by the batter and is missed” or “is not struck at, if any part of the ball passes through any part of the strike zone.”

Umpires One and Two thus believe in an reality in which balls and strikes exist as objective facts. Umpire Two is confident in his ability to discern the difference between balls and strikes: he “calls ’em as they are.” Umpire One, however, opens the door for subjective experience. He is less sure of his ability to determine empirically what is a ball and what is a strike. He believes that what he knows is wholly determined by his sensory perceptions, which provide the raw data from which he reasons and draws his conclusions. He does the best that he can with this data: his eyes provide data that lead him to believe that one pitch is a ball, another a strike, and he “calls ’em” as he “sees ’em.” As far as Umpire Two is concerned, Umpire One either suffers from a lack of self-confidence or is simply not that great an umpire. A great umpire is deals in truth not perception.

Umpire Two believes that his act of calling a ball or a strike is what a linguist would call a *constative* utterance: it is purely descriptive. The opposite of a constative utterance is a *performative* utterance, which is not a description but an action: it performs what it says at the moment that it says it. An example would be a minister saying, "I now pronounce you husband and wife." His utterance brings the wedded state into being.

Umpire One finds himself in a position similar to that of the philosopher J. L. Austin, who set out to characterize performative utterance by drawing line between them and constatives, which he felt had received the lion's share of attention from theorists of human language. What he discovered, however, was that the line is unstable, even untenable: all utterances perform action, and thus have something of the performative about them, even when they seem to be purely descriptive. The statement, "You've got two strikes" will perform a different kind of work, depending on who says it and in what context. If a manager tells that to a pitcher, he might be doing more than simply describe the situation: he might, in fact, be urging a pitcher not to pitch around a hitter, but simply to go after him and get the strikeout. If a third-base coach says it to a hitter, he's probably warning the hitter to be a little more defensive, now that he's a strike away from being put out.

There are two ways to understand the third umpire's position. Perhaps he finds his two colleagues hopelessly naïve. More precisely, perhaps he finds Umpire Two naïve in his belief in objective perception and purely constative utterance; meanwhile, he thinks that Umpire One doesn't go far enough. Umpire Three believes in the distinction between balls and strikes, but he believes that the distinction exists only in the moment that he makes the call of "Ball" or "Strike." That's the nice way of thinking about him. The other way is to see him as a man who delights in naked power, who is overly emphatic about the performative nature of his utterance: "*nothin' ain't nothin'* until *I* calls 'em." He is the arbiter of truth and truth is arbitrary.

There are, of course, some limits to the naked power of a home-plate umpire. He has to keep up appearances. He can't call a pitch a strike that is so ridiculously out of the strike zone that even a casual observer can tell clearly that it is ball. Likewise, he can't call a pitch that sails through the middle of a strike zone a ball without having his judgment (or his

eyesight) questioned. But at the major league level, the confrontation between pitcher and hitter is a cat-and-mouse game that is played on the edges of the strike zone, with pitchers trying to fool hitters into swinging at pitches that are just out of the strike zone or luring batters into concentrating their attention on one part of the zone, then delivering a pitch elsewhere. Given that the pitches can come at 90 m.p.h. and are often at the margins of the strike zone, umpires have a lot of power indeed.

I think that if George W. Bush were to hear the umpire joke, he would see himself as the third umpire but would tell people that he was the second: the believer in objective reality who tells the truth. And he'd see himself as the third umpire not because he is a subtle student of the nature of linguistic utterance, but rather because the third umpire exults in his power to shape reality and, besides, he gets the punch line.

Perhaps you think that I am being unfair, but then should we make of this moment from a *New York Times Magazine* article, written by Ron Suskind and published in the late stages of the 2004 campaign? The article investigates George W. Bush's conception of a "faith-based" presidency. It reads like the umpire joke translated into the idiom of politics, except that it isn't very funny:

In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in *Esquire* that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend—but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can

study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

The dream of Bush-League America is to remake the nation and the world in its own image. The umpire strikes back.

DURING THE SPRING of 2006, I watched the inaugural World Baseball Classic with great interest. The U.S. team was a disappointment, and Japan defeated Cuba to win the title. I remember wondering at the time whether George W. Bush had taken any interest in the tournament. I remembering thinking that he should have, because it might have led him to rethink the way he invokes the so-called national pastime. It might even have taught him a political lesson or two.

At the start of each game of the World Baseball Classic, a television announcer would intone: "The game that means 'America,' now means so much to the world." But this is nothing new. The Japanese have been playing organized baseball since 1873. Baseball is now cherished in Japan and Korea and across the Caribbean and Latin America. As far as exporting our cultural traditions goes, we've been much more successful with baseball than we have been with democracy. Fidel Castro doesn't love the U.S., but he sure loves *el béisbol*.

There's an allegory about both American power and the American character be found in the events of the inaugural World Baseball Classic. Team USA may have entered as the nominal favorite, but it didn't make the semi-finals after losses to Canada, Korea, and Mexico. Mission not accomplished.

After the U.S. narrowly won its second-round game against Japan with the aid of a call by an umpire that ESPN's television announcers deemed "a crying shame," Senichi Hoshino, a senior director of the Hanshin Tigers, fumed: "Any umpire who makes a mistake like that should just quit. It is bush league." Hoshino no doubt intended his remark to be disparaging. After all, "bush-league" connotes inferiority, even incompetence: if you're bush-league, you belong in the minors, not in the majors.

But the "bush-league" is a little less, well, bush-league these days: in recent years, many Americans have begun to embrace a bush-league

perspective, priding themselves on their down-home roots. Minor league ball can seem more “real” than the show biz game played in big cities like New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, and Washington, DC. Watching a “farm team” playing in a small stadium in a small town can seem like a more intimate and more authentic (not to mention cheaper) way of watching the game. Think *Bull Durham*, which celebrates the seeming timelessness of the minor-league game. *Bull Durham* looks at the bush leagues with affection and respect, forgiving them their inferior and amateurish qualities and extolling their faithfulness to tradition.

Bush’s return to Midland, Texas, after his father’s successful presidential campaign, can be seen as a similar affirmation of the power of the bush-league. Bush, however, takes *Bull Durham*’s affection one step farther: he willfully ignores the negative connotations of the term “bush-league,” forgetting that the price for “authenticity” and “tradition” is very often “inferiority” and “amateurism.”

Leaving the capital behind, Bush returned to the provinces. He was rejecting the cosmopolitanism of Washington, D.C., in favor of a populist Americanism that he identified with his Texas roots. He rejected, too, the culture of the Northeast where he was educated (at Andover, Yale, and Harvard), embracing instead evangelical Christianity. He prided himself in his parochialism: before assuming the presidency, he had traveled abroad comparatively little for someone with his background, but to him this provinciality was a mark of his authenticity as an American.²⁶ He chose to ignore the global, to immerse himself in the local. He rejected the world in order to embrace “America,” implicitly regarding the two as antithetical concepts.

The bush-league perspective is anti-urban and anti-modern, provincial and nationalistic. Thomas Frank captures it perfectly in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*: “People in suburban Kansas City vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of New York and Washington, D.C.; people in rural Kansas vituperate against the sinful cosmopolitan elite of Topeka and suburban Kansas City.”²⁷

What’s sinful about cosmopolitanism is the fact that it offers an alternative to nationalism: to be cosmopolitan is to consider yourself first and foremost a citizen of the world and to put your obligations to humanity above your obligations to your country. Even worse,

cosmopolitanism also offers an alternative to the kind of universalist thinking that emphasizes sameness and common denominators. It leads to an appreciation of difference. Cosmopolitans see difference as an opportunity to be embraced rather than a problem to be solved.

The bush-league perspective isn't interested in difference. It's interested in what makes Americans American, and it cherishes the belief that America is exceptional because it is founded on the idea of individualism. Let us recall Bart Giamatti's suggestion that that "baseball fits America so well because it embodies the interplay of individual and group that we love." Seen as the most individualistic of team sports, baseball is often described as a fundamentally conservative game, not only because of its emphasis on individual achievement, but also because of its reverence for the past, its perpetuation of patriarchal values, and its evocation of pastoral experience.

But the institutional history of the sport suggests that there might be an alternative way of thinking about what baseball tells us about ourselves as Americans. Indeed, we can use what Barzun referred to as the "realities of the game" to "reframe" baseball (to use Lakoff's term). Look at the same set of facts through a different interpretive lens and suddenly baseball seems not "conservative" but "progressive," not a *national* game at all, but rather a cosmopolitan game with an international past and future.

Two years ago, the Baseball Hall of Fame mounted an exhibition that gave credence to the idea that the roots of baseball are much older than we've thought and possibly traceable to the ancient Egyptian game of *seker-hemat*. What's more, baseball's roots in pastoral experience may be overrated as well: the professional game probably arose from rules codified in 1845 by a team from New York called the Knickerbockers. And baseball was well ahead of the curve of American social progress in 1947 when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier by playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Just before the World Baseball Classic began, *Sports Illustrated* wrote that "big league baseball is, by almost any definition, more popular in the U.S. than ever." It's also more culturally diverse than ever: at the start of last season, there were 1,187 players on the 40-man rosters of all the major league teams. Of these, 830 were born in the U.S., 141 in the Dominican Republic, 78 in Venezuela, 39 in Puerto Rico, 21 in Mexico, 20 in Canada,

13 in Japan, 10 in Cuba, eight in South Korea, seven in Panama, six in Australia and 14 elsewhere. And, in acknowledgment of the international roots of American culture, one-third of the U.S.-born major leaguers participating in the World Baseball Classic are playing for teams other than Team USA.

What was valuable about the World Baseball Classic was not that it encouraged players to become nationalists for two weeks, but rather that it allowed them to cross, at least for a while, the boundaries that typically separate them – imagine Yankees and Red Sox hugging one another in the dugout after Team USA defeats Japan! Afterwards, they returned home to their major-league teams enriched by the experience of playing with those they usually play against, and against those they usually play with, not to mention being on the same field with players from other countries whom they would otherwise never meet. And I need hardly mention one of the biggest examples of working across boundaries: the Classic was a partnership between two long-time antagonists, the owners and the players.

If we take for granted that Barzun was right, that baseball holds up a mirror to the American character, perhaps it's time we reframed that mirror and took a closer look. The U.S., like baseball, is far more cosmopolitan than the bush-leaguers would have us believe. Mr. Hoshino was, I think, onto something much bigger than the outcome of a baseball game. It's time for Americans to admit our mistakes and leave the bush-league perspective behind. American voters started the process in November 2006; they'll have a chance to continue it in November 2008.

Notes

1. Giamatti, "Baseball and the American Character," *Harper's* Oct. 1986: 27.
2. A Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York, 1989), 103-04.
3. Giamatti, "Baseball," 27.
4. Giamatti, "Baseball," 27.

5. “What Giamatti and Rose Said on the Agreement and Disagreements,” *The New York Times* 25 August 1989: A22.
6. Cf. Giamatti, “Power, Politics, and a Sense of History”, *A Free and Ordered Space: The Real World of the University* (New York, 1988): 94-105.
7. Ronald Reagan, *Speaking My Mind: Selected Speeches* (New York, 1989), 212–13; “Reshaping the American Political Landscape,” *A Time for Choosing: The Speeches of Ronald Reagan, 1961-1982* (Chicago, 1983), 185; *Speaking My Mind*, 63–64.
8. George Bush, “Acceptance Speech,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* 55 (1984): 4.
9. Karel van Wolferen, *The Enigma of Japanese Power: People and Politics in a Stateless Nation* (London, 1989), 314.
10. Robert Whiting, *You Gotta Have Wa* (New York, 1989), 28, 49, 66, 78.
11. Donald Hall, *Fathers Playing Catch With Sons: Essays on Sport (Mostly Baseball)* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 30.
12. Hall, 49–50.
13. According to *Newsweek*: “Just as his father, Prescott, did not deliver heavy sermons about the ‘duty to serve,’ George Sr. imposed no noblesse oblige on his children. That is, not overtly. The example of grandfather and father was obvious to young George, or, as he was called by some in Midland, ‘Little George.’ In some ways the discretion and ease of manner of the Bush forebears made their high standard even more difficult to live up to. ‘Effortless grace’ was the informal code of conduct of the old WASP establishment. Achievement was supposed to be made to look easy. Only strivers and arrivistes sweated.”
14. Bush, *Charge*, 16.
15. George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant* (White River Jct., Vermont: Chelsea Green, 2004), 12.

16. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Chapter XI, “Of the Difference Of Manners).
17. Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 68.
18. Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, 33.
19. In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, Lakoff, Continuing his description of strict father ideology, Lakoff argues that such “internal discipline” is necessary because it is what is required for success in the difficult, competitive world. That is, if people are disciplined and pursue their self-interest in their land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper. The link is the pursuit of self-interest. Given opportunity and discipline, pursuing your self-interest should enable you to prosper (*Elephant*, 7-8).
20. Lakoff, *Elephant*, xv.
21. “Intentions Versus Reality in Iraq,” *New York Times* (18 September 2004).
22. “Talking Sense At Last on Iraq,” *New York Times* (21 September 2004).
23. Paul Kengor, “What Bush Believes,” *New York Times* (18 October 2004).
24. See Herbert R. Kohl, *Should We Burn Babar?: Essays on Children's Literature and the Power of Stories* (New York: New Press, 1966).
25. Kenneth T. Walsh; Dan Gilgoff ; Angie C. Marek ; Thomas Omestad, “‘The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.’ George W. Bush, January 20, 2005,” *U.S. News and World Report* (31 January 2005).
26. “Critics often describe Bush as ‘incurious’ about the world, but that word hardly does justice to what feels almost like a principled provincialism. Here was someone who by age 13 was mingling in the country-club set of Houston, who then went on to Andover,

Yale and Harvard Business School—and did so in the age of cut-rate international air fares—and yet he rarely traveled abroad. Bush was in his mid-20's when his father became ambassador to the United Nations, and still he stayed home. He must have had to resist actively his parents' blandishments. He visited China in 1975, when his father was U.S. liaison; Gambia, at President Bush's behest, in 1990; and the Middle East in 1998, when he had begun thinking about his own run for the presidency. (He also traveled to Europe several times in the 90's with the Young Presidents' Organization, a group for corporate executives.)

People close to Bush dismiss his past as irrelevant; he has, they say, both the experience and the character to direct the affairs of the free world. Condoleezza Rice argues that as governor of Texas, Bush gained a familiarity with foreign affairs from his dealings with Mexico. 'He has on-the-ground experience there,' she says, 'which I would say is much more valuable than if he had been attending seminars at the Council on Foreign Relations for the last five years.' Rice also turns the insularity argument on its head, arguing that the president-elect 'comes at this as an American with very, very American values.' These arguments seem reassuring mostly to Bush's own allies. Many Europeans, for example, see the president-elect as an all-American boob." James Traub, "The Bush Years: W.'s World," *New York Times Magazine*, 14 January 2001.

27. Thomas Frank, *What's The Matter With Kansas* (New York: Metropolitan Books), 33–34.