

The romantic fallacy in baseball—a reply

GEORGE F. WILL

I AM forty-nine. *The Public Interest* is twenty-five. We who have sat, as it were, at this journal's feet for virtually all of our adult lives have taken to heart its essential wisdom, which is: There are limits. To everything. There certainly are limits to what an author can do to protect his subject from a reader determined to get it wrong.

One reason I wrote *Men at Work* was to rescue baseball from the fell clutches of a certain kind of person who writes about it. I would call that person an intellectual, but let there be no name-calling. That person loves baseball, in his fashion, but does not really think that baseball is enough. Enough, that is, to hold his attention, deserve his admiration, and satisfy his desire for entertainment that is elegant, beautiful, and inspiring. Sooner or later such a person gets down to his real business, which is loading the game with the freight of theory, until what is a nice sport staggers under the weight of significance. Make that Significance. And then, quicker than you can say "Balk!", there is a lot of clotted talk about the "potentially tragic" and "dramatically heroic" and "Homeric" and "poetic" facets of the game that, lo and behold, is played with the moral equivalent of cavemen's axes. Spare me. Spare it.

I distressed Professor Kagan early, before he got past the dust jacket. He says, "The very name of [Will's] book is ominous." What he finds off-putting is the subtitle: "The Craft of Baseball." Kagan says: Yuk! Will thinks that baseball is just like all other work. I reply (as we do in Washington): Yes and no.

By craft I mean discipline, a set of physical and mental skills subject to constant refinement on the basis of cumulative knowledge. Thus my thesis, which Kagan quotes: "Games are won by a combination of informed aggression and prudence based on information." Kagan scoffs, calling that a "bizarre prejudice" to be explained with reference to my physique and psyche: "This is the fantasy of a smart, skinny kid who desperately wants to believe that brains count more than the speed, power, and reckless courage of the big guys."

Hey, Kagan, don't believe me, believe Tony La Russa—the guy over there in the corner of the dugout, the guy with the World Series ring. He's the one who says that baseball "instincts" are actually the result of "an accumulation of baseball information. They are uses of that information as the basis of decision making as game situations develop."

The case for today's game

Kagan subscribes to the theory that there is a shortage of great players these days. Well, now. The greatest third baseman ever, Mike Schmidt, retired less than two years ago. The greatest lead-off hitter in history, who also is the greatest base stealer, is thirty-one years old—Rickey Henderson. Ryne Sandberg, one of the three best second basemen ever (with Rogers Hornsby and Joe Morgan) just became the third player in history to hit forty home runs while stealing at least twenty-five bases. (The others were Henry Aaron in 1963 and Jose Canseco in 1988.) Roger Clemens (no one ever struck out more men in a game—twenty—than he did on April 29, 1986) isn't chopped liver. Kagan himself notes that "no one in baseball history has had a more sensational first five years than the Mets' Dwight Gooden." There probably never has been a better late-inning short reliever than Dennis Eckersley, but the Orioles' Gregg Olson may be better, some day. (Olson's is a new kind of baseball career. He stepped off the Auburn University campus and into the Orioles' bullpen. Time was when relief pitchers were worn-out starters. Today the game is too demanding for such recycling of tuckered-out arms.)

In trying to demonstrate what he considers baseball's decline, Kagan scores a few easy hits against some large fish in baseball's small barrel: against domed stadiums, raucous scoreboards, artificial turf. (By the way, in Kagan's golden age, before baseball had night games, there were sixteen parks with real grass. There still are.) The trend in baseball is against such stadiums, scoreboards, and turf. It is not out of the question that the designated hitter will be gone before this century is.

Professor Kagan's credentials as a critic become suspect when he says that the game is "much more boring" than it was when he and the world (and I) were young, in the 1950s. He cites the fact, as though it is sufficient proof of boringness, that games are longer. No one ever wished that *Paradise Lost* were longer, but fans often wish that baseball games were. And certainly length is not necessarily boring, or otherwise bad, in baseball games.

There are many reasons why games are longer than they used to be. More pitches are thrown, in part because the umpires, lobbied by the batters, have shrunk the strike zone; so there is too much nibbling at its edges, and too many hitters going deep into the count, looking for walks. Also, in the dead-ball era—and even after the coming of the lively ball, before power was distributed, in the form of large hitters, throughout line-ups—pitchers were more often able simply to put the ball over the plate and let the fielders do their work. Christy Mathewson once said that a pitcher had to be strong enough to throw as many as a hundred pitches occasionally. Today 130 is about normal for nine innings.

Also, today's games are longer because of the increased recourse to relief pitching, which (along with new pitches like the slider and split-finger fastball) makes hitting harder and today's fine hitters especially admirable. Games also are lengthened—not slowed, but lengthened—by the increased emphasis on base running, which results in repeated throws over to first base and other disruptions of the pitcher's concentration.

But if base running is boring to Kagan, perhaps he should pick another sport. Serious fans savor base stealing because it is the baseball achievement in which luck matters least. It is almost entirely a matter of the base runner's—if you will pardon the expression—craftsmanship.

Kagan says that running is "the modern substitute ... for hitting." But today, as in the 1950s for which Kagan pines, the major-league batting average is around .260. And there always have been

many more (today in excess of three times more) singles and walks than extra-base hits. The running game is not a substitute for hitting, it is a substitute for standing around and waiting for someone to hit the ball hard enough to wake up the Kagans who are dozing in the stands, uninterested in anything more subtle than a three-run home run.

It is, to say no more, quaint for Kagan to say that baseball's decline, "aesthetically," is apparent in the fact of night baseball. But I will say more, beginning with this: Only an intellectual could believe that.

The wickedness of night baseball is apt to be an article of faith for someone—say, a college professor—who has a flexible work week and a lot of afternoons free. Factory workers appreciate night games. Furthermore, if baseball's decline began with lights, the era of decline is a lot longer than the pre-decline. Night games came to the major leagues fifty-five years ago, just thirty-five years into the modern era. It will not be many years before most games in the modern era will have been night games. Kagan, the author of a *conservative* critique, must come to grips with the familiar conservative dilemma, that of deciding when a mere innovation (obnoxious) has been around long enough to become a tradition (venerated).

The shortcomings of the fifties

In his rather sweet meander down memory lane, drenched with sentimentality about the 1950s, Kagan actually celebrates the fact that the Yankees ruled like "Olympian gods," challenged primarily by "the mighty Dodgers and Giants." Yes, indeed. In 1951 all three New York teams finished first. (The Giants and Dodgers tied.) But if you did not live in New York—bulletin: many fans didn't—that wasn't so swell. Instead of the Olympian reign of New Yorkers, many fans preferred the 1978-1987 period when, for the first time in history, ten different teams won the World Series in ten years.

In the 1950s, says Kagan, baseball "held its place as part of nature, timeless and regular as Newton's universe." Oh? As Newton's universe may have seemed but never was.

We know a lot more about the universe than Newton did, thanks to better instruments of observation and measurement. Kagan may think that those instruments take the romance out of the heavens. Be that as it may, we know that the universe involves a lot more wobbling and banging around than used to be apparent.

Baseball in the 1950s also was a lot less settled and tidy than it seemed from afar. In just five years of that supposed golden age, 25 percent of the teams changed cities. Baseball was not part of nature. It was—there you go again, Will, stomping on romance—a social institution. For example, it became fully integrated two years later than Central High School in Little Rock. (In 1959, when the Red Sox finally discovered that blacks could play the game. By then there had been eight MVP awards to blacks.)

Kagan finds fault with my choices of a manager, pitcher, hitter, and fielder on which to focus. But Kagan spikes himself several times. Tony La Russa, he thinks, does not have a sufficiently “blue-collar, extroverted, nonintellectual style.” Yes, but what he does have is a team that wins, a lot. So what, says Kagan; La Russa has the best physical material with which to work. That is probably true, but his players are not all that much better than those of teams that do not get the most from their material. Also, Kagan misunderstands the particular play that he analyzes. La Russa did indeed guess wrong about a particular pitch. So Kagan says that La Russa was “saved by the sheer speed of the runner.” Indeed. That runner was a pinch runner, put in the game by La Russa for another pinch runner. His speed was part of La Russa’s calculation.

Kagan thinks it a failing—a moral failing, really; a preference for the mundane over the heroic—that I chose to study Orel Hershisser rather than Dwight Gooden. Kagan prefers Gooden because he is more of a power pitcher, “a great strikeout artist.” That he is. (Although in the season I covered Hershisser he had more strikeouts than Gooden). But what is so special about strikeouts as opposed to other ways of getting people out? Here we are coming close to the core of Kagan’s complaint. Strikeouts are, he thinks, more heroic.

Shortstop Cal Ripken also seems to strike Kagan as somehow, well, banal. Kagan thinks that I chose Ripken because he is “the intellectuals’ shortstop.” I did indeed pick him for the same reason the players picked him as the smartest at his position. He illustrates my thesis about the importance of mind in this physical game. In 1990 Ripken set three remarkable records. He made only three errors. The previous record, set in 1989, was six, set by the Blue Jays’ Tony Fernandez, who played on artificial turf and played a lot fewer innings than Ripken played in 1990. Also, Ripken had 431 consecutive errorless chances in one season (the previous record for one season was 331), and his fielding

percentage was .996 (the previous record for a shortstop was .992). Are great athletic achievements tainted, are they drained of heroism, if they are produced, in part, by intelligence?

Kagan wrongly emphasizes home runs and strikeouts because he does not appreciate the primacy of winning in the team sport of baseball. The baseball people whom I have been around have icy contempt for players whose goal is not simply to win. When I asked Tony Gwynn what his highest goal was—hitting .400, piling up batting titles, whatever—he looked at me as though I was dim-witted and answered with one word: “Winning.”

Perhaps Kagan is too much of a liberal individualist to understand the importance of winning as a team. In any event, he finds Tony Gwynn the “strangest” of my choices of subjects. But Gwynn’s ethic of winning explains why Gwynn is not pleased by hitting a home run on a pitch he should not have swung at and with a swing that is not his best. Gwynn has a feeling for the texture of this sport of the long season: over a span of 162 games he can contribute most to winning by doing what he does best, consistently.

Kagan finds it anti-heroic that Gwynn “knows his limitations and accepts them.” And here we arrive at the heart of the matter. Listen up, readers of *The Public Interest*. Are we or are we not in favor of facing facts, including this fundamental one: There are limits. To everything and everyone. And ignoring them is not smart, let alone heroic.

Kagan, so impatient with Gwynn, prefers Mighty Casey. “If Mighty Casey came to bat at a crucial moment today, George Will would want him to punch a grounder through the right side to move the runner to third and leave things up to the next batter.” Well, speaking for George Will, let me say: That depends on who the next batter is, who the pitcher is, the game situation, who is hot and who is not that day or week or month—it depends on a lot of things. These are the sorts of things that Tony La Russa knows; a lot of other people—mostly people who win less often—do not know them. A La Russa will *manage* even a Mighty Casey. And such a manager will have no trouble managing a Tony Gwynn, because he and Gwynn have exactly the same (team) ambition: winning.

If Mighty Casey, instead of swinging for the fences and striking out, had moved the runner along, he would have earned no praise from Kagan. But there might have been joy in Mudville.

Professionalism

I share Kagan's admiration for Joe DiMaggio, with whom I am privileged to sit on the Baltimore Orioles' board of directors. I share Kagan's awe for the fifty-six-game hitting streak. However, it is not unromantic for me to cite as proof of DiMaggio's genius something other than the streak. I would not admire DiMaggio one whit less if a brilliant defensive play had stopped the streak in the middle by turning a hit into an out (or, to be blunt, if a less compliant official scorer had stopped the streak by turning a hit into an error).

Baseball people will tell you that what made DiMaggio into DiMaggio was judgment of the sort that enabled him to pass through an entire career without ever getting thrown out going from first to third. Other players have been better at the ostensibly "heroic" things—hitting, hitting with power—that Kagan fancies. But no one was ever a more consummate professional—the encomium that baseball people prefer. It is worth pondering that when baseball people want to call someone a hero they do it by semantic indirection, using the word "professional."

"Will's concept [of heroism]," says Kagan, "is less aesthetic but more democratically modern: everyone is a potential hero, provided that he cares for his craft and works hard to perfect it." (I have been called many things, but rarely, if ever, "democratic" or "modern." This mudslinging must cease.) Not everyone is a greatly gifted athlete. Every major-league player is. But not every major-league player has the (here I take custody of the word) heroic willfulness to pull himself above the common major-league herd of the merely gifted.

Kagan is a classicist, used to the company of gods. Perhaps for that reason it is beyond my poor powers to get him to share my enthusiasm for the "everydayness heroism" that is elicited—but not from everybody—by the everyday game. Gwynn, unlike Kagan's hero Roy Hobbs, does not perform deeds that are "magical." Gwynn also is unlike Hobbs in another way, one that should seize the attention and kindle the empathy of any author of a "conservative critique": Hobbs is fictional; Gwynn is real.

George F. Will, a lapsed professor of political philosophy, is a columnist aspiring, and hereby auditioning, to be sports editor of The Public Interest.