

United States' Baseball Diplomacy in Cuba:

HOW THE NATIONAL PASTIME FUNCTIONS AS A DIPLOMATIC
TOOL AND CAN CONTRIBUTE TO A COLLECTIVE HOMERUN



Jeroen Minheere, S1010582
MA Thesis, Transatlantic Studies
Radboud University
j.minheere@student.ru.nl
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Abstract

Baseball is the national pastime of both the United States and Cuba, and is therefore of incredible value to both its citizens as the sport continues to warm the hearts of millions of baseball fans. The sport is also used as a diplomatic tool, mainly by the US government to enhance positive relations with Cuba. This can be categorized under public diplomacy as it is part of their foreign policy, while at the same time not being limited to government action only, as private businesses are also involved in these baseball interactions. Recently, the academic field has seen a shift to sport diplomacy as an academic field in and of itself as a specialization of public diplomacy. This thesis attempts to fill a gap, as few research has been conducted on sport diplomacy regarding US-Cuban relations through the lens of baseball, by answering the question whether or not baseball has helped to improve US-Cuban relations, and whether or not it can continue to be an important factor in drawing the two countries closer together. First, the history of US-Cuban relations through the lens of baseball will be analyzed with the symbolic circularity of a baseball field in mind, as the history of US-Cuban relations shows clear signs of circularity and inevitability. Subsequently, this thesis will specifically focus on the period after 2015, given that this was the year that the American and Cuban embassies reopened, and thus diplomatic relations restarted, in order to successfully answer the aforementioned research question.

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Introduction

Baseball is one of the most interesting variables in the historical evolution of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. Baseball has sometimes even been the only remaining beacon of hope that persevered during absolute low-points of US-Cuban relations, especially when diplomatic recognition was rescinded, yet baseball interactions and exchanges between the United States and Cuba still occurred. The history of US-Cuban relations through the perspective of baseball shows a clear interconnectedness, a circularity of interests between the two countries, and a sense of inevitability of baseball in assessing the failures and successes of US diplomatic efforts in Cuba. This thesis will therefore answer the question whether or not baseball has helped to improve US-Cuban relations, and whether or not it can continue to be an important factor in drawing the two countries closer together in the near future. As US-Cuban relations through the lens of baseball, both informal and diplomatic, are significant from the very first moment of contact between the two countries, the time period will start in the mid-nineteenth century and continue in the twenty-first century, as this topic is still highly relevant and has not yet seen a denouement.

Various concepts will be used repeatedly throughout this thesis, and will therefore be briefly explained in order to create a basic understanding of them that will lay the foundation before they will be used throughout the chapters. Baseball has played a significant role in US-Cuban relations as an instrument of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy can be defined as “the process by which international actors seek to accomplish the goals of their foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics” (Cull 31), and is used as “an instrument that governments use to mobilize [resources of soft power] to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments” (Nye 95). Public diplomacy is thus an approach by a government or a country with the intended result of establishing positive relations with another country, both their officials and their citizens, and this is fueled by soft power. Soft power can be defined as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (ibid.), and is interdependent on culture, values, and policies. In isolation, soft power is not powerful enough to alter bilateral relations, but it can become a powerful diplomatic tool in combination with tactics of hard power. Next to public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is also relevant for US-Cuban relations through the perspective of baseball. Cultural diplomacy can be defined as “the use of creative expression and exchanges of ideas, information, and people to increase mutual understanding”

(Schneider 191), which “plays out where people spend their time” (Ryan 30). In this regard, baseball worked as a tool for cultural diplomacy as it created a sense of Cuban likeability towards the United States because of interactions and exchanges through sport. Baseball worked as a breakthrough between the countries’ distinct cultural norms and values, as baseball signified a common language between Cuba and the United States, thereby also shaping Cuban identity in post-colonial times of unaccustomed independence. As sport makes up an important part of a culture, sport diplomacy is also an important concept that needs to be considered, especially as it is recently emerging as an academic field. Sport diplomacy “has necessitated a distinctly state-based focus; but it is self-consciously limited. By considering sport in direct relation to the three fundamental attributes of global diplomacy – communications, representation, and negotiation – it is possible to de-center the state, and a more nuanced appreciate of the practice of sport and diplomacy emerges” (Rofe 225). This decentering of the state, and thereby government as its most important actor, is particularly relevant as diplomatic endeavors through baseball occurred prior to official government policies, as Thomas Zeiler argues that, while focusing on the initiation of racism and discrimination through imperialism, “American imperialism relied on the activities groups like baseball’s fraternity of executives, players, chroniclers, and boosters, who in the course of their travels in effect helped to define a racially ordered imperial domain (182), while at the same time arguing that “baseball players, like many other enterprising transnational tourists throughout history, carried to foreign lands the fundamental characteristics of their culture’s values and practices, and they encountered those of their hosts” (184). Businesses and individual actors, unaffiliated with US government, thus took the initial step in exchanges and international interactions through baseball, thereby unintendedly using the national pastime as a diplomatic tool. From this perspective, sport diplomacy plays an important role in the non-governmental part of diplomacy, but this thesis will show that baseball also worked as a diplomatic tool for the US government itself.

In contrast to cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy is diplomacy that is officially conducted by the state, both by governments and non-government organizations. The official diplomatic visit that Obama paid to Cuba in March 2016 was in fact an organized act of the US government that was meant to shape public diplomacy between the United States and Cuba. Public diplomacy also has a crucial non-governmental part, however, which can for instance be conducted by businesses trying to enhance bilateral commercial relations, thereby being part of what has been defined as ‘nation branding,’ which is the “intricate link between a state’s domestic and foreign self-representation” (Gienow-Hecht 756), and “is about

influencing and creating positive platforms and an effective environment for a nation's brands to compete in markets [, and] can also be used for political purposes or diplomacy, and sometimes those two approaches, business and politics, are intertwined and need to be streamlined or integrated to reach the same goal" (Gudjonsson 286). Nation branding is a crucial aspect of public diplomacy as it portrays the interconnected nature of a country's image at home as well as abroad. Baseball can be seen as a primary example of US' nation branding in Cuba, as the sport was implemented to enhance interaction and exchanges in order to improve US' image in Cuba to ultimately improve the US-Cuban relationship. Especially the post-2015 era has seen an increase in such diplomatic efforts, both cultural and public, to improve US-Cuban relations, and baseball has been an important tool in attempting to establish this improved relationship.

The academic field of sport diplomacy itself is relatively new, as it has only recently emerged in the twenty-first century. Earlier research conducted also comprised sport diplomacy, but the nomenclature was not yet in effect. When US-Cuban baseball diplomacy is researched, the majority of the academic work focuses on general relations or sport relations between the US and Cuba, where baseball only played a minor part in that research (Guggenheim; Radtke; Trunkos and Heere; Webster). When US-Cuban baseball diplomacy is researched in isolation, which has not yet occurred that frequently, approaches that have been used are a comparison to the more successful ping pong diplomacy in China (Carter and Sugden), the effect of the Cold War and its aftermath (Bunck), the 1999 baseball exchange between the Cuban national team and the Baltimore Orioles (Shearer), and a critique that baseball diplomacy should not be considered as actual diplomacy (Carter; Garofalo). While the academic field is still developing regarding US-Cuban baseball diplomacy, it is striking to see the amount of theses that have already been written on this subject (Harral; Martinen; Noyes; Trikaliotis). Very few academic articles have been written from a Cuban perspective (Huish et al.; Pérez Jr.), and a contemporary focus seems to be on the influence that the American Major League Baseball (MLB) can, or should, have on improving diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba (Añorve; Eastman; Elias; Klein and Marcus; Schneider; St. Pierre; Zaworska). It is thus the case that the academic field on both sport diplomacy and US-Cuban baseball diplomacy is still in full development, meaning that there is plenty of room for further research. There is a noticeable gap in the currently existing academic field regarding a sole focus on US-Cuban baseball diplomacy, and particularly the extent to which it has improved US-Cuban relations in the past, and the extent to which it can still do so in the near future. In addition to that, there is a considerable absence of research on

the period after 2015, which is a significant year as the American and Cuban embassies in Havana and Washington were reopened in December of that year, thereby opening a potential relaunch in improved diplomatic relations. Given this gap in the academic literature, this thesis will pay particular attention to the post-2015 era of US-Cuban relations through the perspective of baseball, while at the same time researching this period with the long bilateral history of the United States and Cuba in mind, as all the preceding events and incidents have defined and framed this very relationship up to this day.

Although the relationship between the United States and Cuba is almost 150 years old, their diplomatic relation is now more relevant than ever, due to a multitude of different reasons. First of all, there are two relatively new leaders in both countries, as president Biden took office in January 2021, and president Díaz-Canel, who already was president of Cuba since April 2018, has been elected as leader of the communist party in April 2021, thereby making him the most powerful person in Cuba. These political transitions in both countries are significant for the future of US-Cuban diplomatic relations, as their precedents were not involved with attempting to improve the bilateral relationship. Quite contrarily, president Trump took a significantly harsher stance towards Cuba during his presidency, thereby enforcing stricter policies and legislations that did not help to improve US-Cuban relations, just like Raúl Castro repeatedly expressed his antipathy towards capitalist United States. This reversed some of the diplomatic progress that Obama has made during his presidency, who showed unprecedented efforts in establishing improved US-Cuban relations. Obama showed that one presidential run is certainly not sufficient to generate irreversibly improved relations, but he laid a promising twenty-first century foundation. Therefore, the transition to new country leaders can work in a make-or-break type of manner, thereby showing the contemporary diplomatic relevance of US-Cuban relations.

Secondly, the issues of both Cuban immigrants crossing the American border illegally and Cuban baseball players defecting from their country to be eligible to play baseball in the United States are having an increasingly detrimental effect on both countries. The immigrants and defectors do not choose this path voluntarily, but see no other choice due to harsh policies, laws, and regulations in both countries; traveling from Cuba to the United States, or vice versa, is almost completely prohibited, immigrations laws are almost as restrictive as possible, and so are regulations regarding Cuban baseball players attempting to make a career in the United States, as American baseball teams are not allowed to negotiate contracts with Cuban residents. Both immigrants and defectors thus see no other choice then to flee their country due to these policies, thereby not only leaving behind their own country and families,

but consequently also risking their lives in attempting to illegally cross the border. This has a considerable societal impact, and as baseball can be implemented as a diplomatic tool to improve US-Cuban relations, it might be a step forward in the direction of improved relations, and consequently a step towards more tolerant legislation that can potentially save Cuban lives, thereby making it an urgent matter as well.

By researching the potential of baseball as a diplomatic tool in attempting to improve US-Cuban relations, these societal and political issues are inevitably interconnected with the topic of this thesis. The US-Cuban relationship in and of itself is already an urgent matter, as the current state of affairs is detrimental for both the American and Cuban economy, their businesses, their diplomatic efforts, and the general welfare of Cuban citizens. This thesis thus contributes to the understanding that attempts should be made to improve US-Cuban relations, potentially by implementing baseball, as the current conditions will not lead to improvements. This is an urgent matter, especially because of the illegal immigrants and baseball defectors that flee Cuba in order to attempt to build up a life in the United States and thereby risk their very own lives, thus meaning that these matters can better be resolved sooner than later. The societal impact of this research could serve to contribute to the quality of life for these Cubans, and in general to an improved relationship between the United States and Cuba. This thesis is structured as follows. In Chapter I, the long history of the relationship between the United States and Cuba will be analyzed through the perspective of baseball, thereby connecting historical occurrences with the impact of baseball, and continuously keeping the symbolic circularity of a baseball field in mind. After that, Chapter II will specifically focus on the post-2015 era of US-Cuban relations, once again through the lens of baseball, in order to assess to what extent baseball can still be implemented as an effective diplomatic tool. Finally, the Conclusion is comprised of an assessment of this research to decide to what extent baseball can indeed still play a role as an instrument of diplomacy in the near future of US-Cuban relations, thereby taking into account both the long history of this relationship, as well as the more recent incidents that have determined the current status quo in US-Cuban relations. Altogether, this structure works as a construction that accomplishes to answer the research question whether or not baseball has helped to improve US-Cuban relations, and whether or not it can continue to be an important factor in drawing the two countries closer together in the near future.

Chapter I. A Series of Strikes: US-Cuban Relations Through Baseball

The historical development of US-Cuban relations, which is all but linear and smooth, can be divided into four distinct, yet interconnected, periods. This artificial division does not only make the story of US-Cuban relations more comprehensible, but it also highlights the circularity of it, and it is meant to emphasize the role that sport diplomacy – and baseball in particular – has played in it. These periods show contrasting stages in the evolution of US-Cuban relations, all of which can be clearly identified by three crucial milestones. The first period runs from the mid-nineteenth century, the period in which the US launched and consolidated its hegemony in the Western hemisphere and Latin America, including the Caribbean (Powelson 843; Gallagher and Robinson 10), to 1902, the year in which Cuba gained independence. The second period runs from 1902 to 1959, the year that Cuba became a communist country after Castro's revolution. The third period roughly comprises the Cold War and thus ends with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The fourth period runs from 1991 to 2015, when the embassies in Washington and Havana were reopened, thereby signaling the reestablishment of official diplomatic relations.

These stages of US-Cuban relations resemble a baseball field; the three distinct stages that characterize US-Cuban relations can be seen as the three bases on a baseball field. Both in a baseball field and in US-Cuban history, bases are incredibly important milestones and can change the nature of the game as well as the course of history. The home base both starts and ends a play in baseball, regardless of the outcome or success of it.

A similar feeling of circularity shapes the historical relations between the two countries: the current state of their relationship is determined by all preceding developments and incidents for both Cuba and the United States, just like a baseball play is determined by both teams' actions and interconnected nature throughout the game. Similarly to a baseball field, US-Cuban Relations were started from common ground and principles and then went through tensions and discrepancies, only to return searching for common grounds and purposes again.

Despite the ideological and cultural differences, these two countries cannot neglect or disregard each other. Baseball vividly represents the inescapability of US-Cuban relations. It is a national sport in both countries, and it has played a symbolic role in the definition of the roles both Washington and Havana have assigned to themselves in their century-long encounters.

1.1 - Pre-Cuban Independence and United States' Interests

Informal political and diplomatic relationships between the United States and Cuba started in 1854, when the United States intended to purchase Cuba from Spain with the issuance of the famous Ostend Manifesto (Hershey 78). Critically condemned by Northern States and Europe due to US' ambiguous interests in Cuba to add another slave state to create a majority over the non-slave states, the purchase was not completed (Webster 12-3). Cubans fought the Ten Years' War against the Spanish colonial rule from 1868, supported by the United States, who provided them weaponry. Diplomatic relations were not yet established despite US' interests, however, as President Grant found considerable political opposition.

US-Cuban economic relations also commenced during this period, as "more than half of Cuba's exported sugar was destined for the United States market [...] By early in the 1880s, nearly 94 percent of Cuba's sugar production was exported to the United States" (Pérez Jr. 496). Both countries were thus dependent on each other, as the US needed the sugar import and Cuba the export profits, these economic relations therefore being "in large measure the source of Cuban prosperity" (497) in this period. After Cuba's second independence war of 1897, the period of Spanish colonial rule in Cuba came to an end. The Spanish-American war began a year later after the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana was blamed on Cuba. The resulting war ended with an increased American influence on the island as the US only agreed to withdraw its troops from Cuba if they agreed to the Platt Amendment, thereby holding "the right to intervene in Cuban affairs when necessary," (Martinen 4) showing the legal basis for future interventions. When the Treaty of Paris was signed in December 1898, the American takeover of Cuba from Spain was assured, and it would take another four years until Cuba would gain independence.

It was in this same period that baseball was invented and gained popularity. Baseball originated in the early nineteenth century in the United States, rapidly becoming a national sport. As sugar exports from Cuba to the United States grew tremendously after the mid-nineteenth century, American baseball soon found its way to Cuba. In the first phase of US-Cuban relations, baseball contributed to establishing people-to-people relations while also shaping Cuban identity in colonial times; in other words, the sport connected Cuban society to a Western cultural milieu and progressively separated the island from its colonial rulers, as both countries derived from these interactions and exchanges what they needed or wanted, while discarding the rest (Pérez Jr. 517).

Nemesio Guilló was the first Cuban to introduce American baseball on the island, as he attended Springhill College in Alabama and “returned to Cuba six years later with a baseball bat and a baseball” (Martinen 10). As Cubans denounced the Spanish colonial rule, baseball gave form to opposition to Spanish colonialism and worked as a symbol of independence and resistance, as playing the American game of baseball psychologically liberated them from Spain (Pérez Jr. 494; Martinen 10; Carter 247-8). The first documented US-Cuban baseball interaction occurred in 1868, “when Guilló’s club defeated American crewmen who were docked in Matanzas” (Turner 68). The first organized baseball exchange occurred in 1887 when the Philadelphia Athletics toured Cuba, inspiring baseball interest in Cuba. The first Cuban national championship was held in 1888 (Noyes 9-10), showing the rapidly growing popularity of Cuban baseball. Whereas the export of sugar was important for the two country’s economic motivations, “the cultural impact of the American game became apparent as words such as *jonron* (homerun) and *doble plei* (double play) cropped up in the language of the Cuban people,” (Paterson 49; Noyes 10) thereby recognizing the cultural significance baseball had for Cubans.

The import of baseball gave Cubans a sense of cultural freedom. Baseball and economic exchanges with the US worked favorably for Cuban identity as it offered the possibility of “national integration of all Cubans, of all classes, black and white, young and old, men and women” (Pérez Jr. 506). The establishment of US-Cuban relations was thus favorable for both countries, also showing the differing interests; whereas the United States mostly favored the economic influence and exchange, Cuba used the superpower to escape Spanish colonialism; despite playing the same game, both countries’ intentions differed greatly from the beginning.

The Spanish-American war presented another moment of US-American baseball interaction. The USS Maine, which exploded and sunk in Havana in 1898 and was one of the motivations behind the Spanish-American War, had a baseball team aboard when it sunk. “The death of the ship’s baseball team was a rallying point for revenge, and baseball was employed to ‘civilize’ and ‘control’ the liberated Cubans” (Elias 3). Although being somewhat ambiguous, this helped establishing frequent baseball exchanges between army units and Cubans, and the number of US baseball teams traveling to Cuba grew (Pérez Jr. 515-6) during the Spanish-American war; more Americans were stationed in Cuba, leading to an increase in baseball exchanges and positive US-Cuban relations, especially since the Americans had liberated the Cubans from Spanish colonial rule. An early example of such an exchange is Ted Sullivan, a renowned Irish American baseball manager, who attempted to

take National League teams to Havana in 1898, as he understood that “if Cuba is to be Americanized [...], one of the first things it needs is baseball” (The Logansport Journal, 08-29, p. 7). The importance of the American soldiers is also highlighted as Sullivan “relie[d] on the presence of 50,000 American troops, needing them, not to protect the umpires, but to patronize the games” (ibid.), thereby emphasizing the friendly nature of these early exchanges.

The first phase of US-Cuban relations saw increasing trade and baseball interaction. The latter was not diplomatically implemented, but initiated mainly by ordinary people, such as the games between American officers and Cubans. Because of the growing interest, however, Cubans themselves already organized baseball games, for example the national championship of 1888. It became clear from the mid-nineteenth century that the United States was politically and economically interested in Cuba. Resulting from slowly establishing relations, baseball found its way into Cuba, both shaping Cuban identity as a form of resistance to Spanish colonialism and contributing to improving US-Cuban relations despite the differing means and ambitions through which both countries utilized these connections.

1.2 - From Independence to Revolution

As a result of the Platt Amendment, the United States had an active military presence in Cuba in the early twentieth century. Despite Cuba being formally independent, the US military frequently intervened in the next thirty years, regardless of support from Cuban governments and political parties. The most significant interventions were the Second Occupation of Cuba (1906-1909), the Little Race War (1912), and the Sugar Intervention (1917-1922). The United States saw it as their plight to ‘protect’ Cuba during this period, although the aforementioned examples could be seen as self-interest. The economic relations blossomed during this period, as US companies owned 60% of the Cuban sugar industry and imported 95% of Cuban crops. This interventionist period ended in 1933 when Machado’s Cuban government was overthrown by rebel groupings, whereafter Ramón Grau claimed the presidential seat and immediately revoked the Platt Amendment. The United States, seeing their military influence disappear, responded by not recognizing Grau’s presidency, as it was deemed irresponsible. The following twenty years were characterized by its inconsequential developments. Under general Batista, in power from 1940 until 1944, Cuba and the US closely cooperated, most significantly visible by the almost complete domination of Cuba’s economy by the United States. The major transition occurred when Fidel Castro came into power in 1959 after he had

already led an unsuccessful revolt against Batista's government (Martinen 4). The United States withdrew all military aid that supported Batista as a revolution was looming large, and the political and economic influence that they had built in Cuba over the preceding century was now extremely limited, leading to impoverished US-Cuban relations.

As for baseball, US-Cuban relations endured the longest despite the disappearance of military, economic, or political ties. Baseball increasingly connected the two countries, the most outstanding example being the US franchise of the Havana Cubans, a renowned baseball team in Cuba. "Quickly nicknamed the 'Sugar Kings' by Cuban fans, the Havana club enjoyed great success in the Class B Florida International League" (Noyes 14), as this Cuban team strikingly thus played in an American league. This was thus a sign of an almost colonial integration of Cuban society in the United States during this period. The Havana Cubans quickly became successful, as they "were competing against American-based franchises, the Sugar Kings consistently won the league title each of the first five years of its existence and had the league's highest attendance" (ibid.), thereby indicating the popularity of baseball in Cuba. The first period saw the initial stage of US-Cuban baseball exchanges, but the US franchise of the Havana Cubans showed the first international baseball interaction that became athletically successful, also showing more cooperation on an organizational level.

Another crucial development for baseball as a diplomatic tool in this period was that the color line was officially broken when Jackie Robinson became the first black baseball player to play in the MLB in 1947 (Keeney). The baseman from the Brooklyn Dodgers broke the color barrier, but it was actually Cuban baseball players that laid the foundation for this breakthrough, as "Cuban players entered the league with gradually darker complexions, laying the groundwork for the idea that a black American could play alongside whites in baseball's top selection" (ibid.). Baseball was not immediately integrated from 1947 onwards, as change occurs gradually, especially in the case of race-related improvements. It can be seen, however, as "another step in the evolution of racial integration that began decades earlier with the introduction of baseball to Cuba and the introduction of Cuban players to the United States" (ibid.). After that, each development thereafter adding another layer to the racial integration of black baseball players in the MLB.

Technological improvements favored the promotion and spread of baseball's popularity on the island, especially as Cuba "had the distinction of being the first nation in the world to extend television to its entire national territory" (Sinclair 505). This is represented in the amount of television and radio broadcasting, also showing the positive nature of US-

Cuban relations despite the political and diplomatic contestations of the 1950s. “In fact, the rebellion in the late 1950s was impacted more by baseball than the other way around. During the baseball season, radio broadcasts were so popular that government troops often were reluctant to leave their barracks to fight the rebels” (Noyes 26). Baseball thus played an important part in the everyday lives of Cubans, possibly even having affected the course of the Cuban revolution, in part due to the quantity of television and radio broadcasts as technology factored into the increasing passion for baseball in Cuba (11), especially when Unión Radio-TV gained broadcasting rights to televise the Cuban baseball series in 1950 (Rivero 9), thereby becoming the first country in Latin America to televise baseball on national TV. “By 1951, Cuba boasted over 14,000 television sets and over 575,000 radios. Broadcasts of baseball games, both in Cuba and in the United States, made up a large portion of the programming schedule on the island” (ibid.). Cubans thus enjoyed watching both domestic and international games, thereby increasing the value baseball had in this period for US-Cuban relations.

As the Cuban revolution came closer and US-Cuban relations deteriorated, baseball relations eventually could not escape the decline in attitudes towards each other. Despite the fact that “before 1959 most professional athletes left Cuba for work in the United States” (Huish et al. 28), US-Cuban baseball exchanges continued to exist. Despite criticism from US government, ambassador Smith in Havana kept arguing that it was safe to continue league games in Cuba. “To prove that the conditions were safe, Ambassador Smith even threw out the first pitch” (Noyes 28) when Buffalo traveled to Havana to play the series. The signs of an upcoming revolution were also visible in the Sugar Kings’ baseball stadium during the Little World Series (LWS) finale in 1959. Rochester played the Havana Cubans in Havana, but “a celebration of the rebel victory spiraled out of control as shots were fired from the stands, hitting the Rochester third base coach and grazing two other Rochester players” (32). Rochester forfeited from the tournament, but the season was finished in regular fashion. The finale was played against the Minneapolis Millers, and Castro, once a promising pitcher himself, watched multiple games from the dugout to advise players and staff. This might have pushed the Sugar Kings to a victory in a decisive seventh game, declaring them winners of the LWS. The fact that a Cuban baseball team won an American competition was an outstanding achievement and is argued as “the high point of an almost seventy-year sporting relationship with the United States” (8). It also indicates how baseball played a role in bringing the United States and Cuba closer together despite political contestations.

The US government aimed to relocate the Sugar Kings franchise to the United States, however, as political unrest and ideological tensions increased considerably after the Cuban revolution. Especially US Secretary of State Christian Herter first asked, and later pressured, Commissioner of Baseball Ford Frick to relocate the Sugar Kings to Jersey (Jamail 199). “Instead of using baseball to improve relations with the new Cuban government, the game was seen as a way to undermine Castro’s regime,” (Noyes 35), thereby overlooking the diplomatic potential baseball had. These missed opportunities due to growing ideological disparities might be the most important incidents of this period. It became difficult to maintain or expand the positively established relations from the first period, as the United States was unable to hold its political influence in Cuba as the latter changed its ideological course. Remarkably, baseball relations sustained longer than political or economic relations, thereby showing both a lack of diplomatic implementation, but also the potential baseball had to ameliorate the US-Cuban relationship.

1.3 - The Cold War Era

Whereas President Eisenhower initially recognized Castro’s government, US attitudes changed when Castro presented his agrarian reform plans and blamed the United States after a freighter exploded in Havana. As a response, Eisenhower initiated an economic embargo and turned to the CIA to train Cuban refugees to overthrow Castro, thereby creating a wave of anti-Americanism in Cuba (Triakiotis 48-9). In 1961, the United States stopped recognizing Cuba diplomatically as they increasingly turned toward communism and the Soviet Union. The Bay of Pigs invasion that same year and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 widened this ideological gap and strengthened the disparity in US-Cuban relations. President Kennedy’s Cuban Project contributed to this split, as his rhetoric “transformed Cuba from a serious, but primarily regional, concern into a top Cold War priority” (Noyes 39). After the Cuban revolution, US-Cuban relations quickly deteriorated and reached an absolute low-point in the mid-1960s.

As a consequence of the abovementioned incidents together with the continuing economic embargo and growing ideological break between the United States and Cuba, all diplomatic relations were cut. The Cold War period is therefore mostly empty regarding diplomatic exchanges, but baseball managed to find its way around some of the conflicts to still play a role in the Cold War-period for US-Cuban relations. Whereas baseball was previously used to

improve the relationship between the United States and Cuba, it became more representative in the Cold War of the hostile and adversarial attitudes towards each other.

After the athletic and diplomatic success of the Havana Sugar Kings in the late 1950s, the early 1960s saw a dramatic turn of events due to Fidel Castro's communist party's rise on the island. Castro officially declared himself to be a communist in 1960, and American baseball players returned to their home country as he continued to nationalize American businesses. As Castro became closer with the Soviet Union, the United States increasingly attempted to isolate Cuba. Baseball was an important part of US-Cuban exchanges, and thus had to be isolated as well. Therefore, the American franchise of the Sugar Kings was moved from Havana to Jersey City in July 1960, with the explanation that "an emergency exists in Havana and that the safety and welfare of baseball personnel in the Cuban capital is or might be endangered" (Asbury Park Evening Press, 07-09, p. 11). Roberto Maduro, president of the Sugar Kings, "received the news in Havana with bitterness. "The International League is making a big mistake," he said. "Baseball was a strong link between the Cuban and American people and it should never have been broken" (ibid.). Although the forced relocation was to be expected due to deteriorating US-Cuban relations, it could have definitely been used as an opportunity for baseball to improve the US-Cuban relationship once more, instead of further depreciating it.

Baseball became a political and ideological battlefield in the early 1970s under Castro, as "the Cuban leadership's efforts to establish a revolutionary culture – to create a Guevarian 'new man' – was a process that occupied considerable time, attention and resources" (Bunck 236-7). Professional sports were elitist in the capitalist world, so Castro attempted to make playing sports available to everyone, thereby creating unity and equality. In doing so, he denigrated baseball as a product of US imperialism (239) in order to strengthen his message. He did not want to throw away baseball altogether but wanted to reshape its structure to fit a communist country, thereby still having faith that Cuba could compete with the United States, as Castro once commented that "one day, when the Yankees accept peaceful coexistence with our country, we shall beat them at baseball too and then the advantages of revolutionary over capitalist sport will be clear to all" (Goldberg 64).

The Cold War period after the Cuban revolution was one of deteriorating US-Cuban relations, as the two countries politically and ideologically diverged from each other. US' failed attempts to combat communism contributed to this, consequently leading to Cuba's shift from the United States to the Soviet Union for international cooperation. Given these impoverished relations, baseball suffered as well with very few baseball exchanges occurring

after 1960 due to the Cold War conflicts. There thus seems to be a synchronous tendency between the overall US-Cuban relations and the implementation of baseball, thereby hinting at a lack of official baseball diplomacy from both countries, as this could have created opportunities for improved relations during this contested time period. The implementation of baseball in this period, however, can be seen as representative of the overall US-Cuban relations, showing a discrepancy in what the United States attempted to achieve and the way Cuba perceived this. It is now pivotal to turn towards the home base to analyze US-Cuban relations in the period from 1991 until 2015.

1.4 - Cuban Thaw

As this period started when the Soviet Union had just collapsed, Cuba lost its main economic and political sponsor and quickly came in a pressing economic crisis, “the context of [which] in contemporary Cuba has entailed a dynamic rethinking of Cuban culture and political economy, one that is intimately bound up with American cultural, political and economic forms” (Eastman 267). Cuba did not have the appropriate resources to become self-sufficient, giving them no other option than to readjust their policies to be more attractive to the United States. For a few years, US-Cuban relations were starting to improve, as President Clinton eased travel restrictions in 1999 to increase cultural exchanges, US companies sold food to Cuba in 2001 for the first time since the Cuban Revolution, and former President Carter visited Cuba in 2002, thereby becoming the first (former) US president to visit the island since 1928. During President Bush’s presidency from 2001 until 2009, however, US-Cuban relations deteriorated once again. Bush expanded travel restrictions, called Cuba one of the few remaining ‘outposts of tyranny,’ imposed more severe punishments for breaking the everlasting embargo, and initiated the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba, a program to impose democracy in Cuba. Since President Obama succeeded Bush in 2009, US-Cuban relations have slightly improved as he enforced a more tolerant policy towards Cuba. The embargo was still in place, however, and Obama was criticized during his first term for a substantial lack of attempting to ameliorate the situation (Elias 16-7; Garofalo 26).

As US-Cuban relations in general were antagonistic during this period, baseball represented this poor quality and can be seen as a symbol of missed diplomatic opportunities to improve the relationship. The 1999 baseball exchange between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cuban national team is the best example for these missed diplomatic opportunities. The baseball exchange was part of Clinton’s policy of eased travel restrictions for cultural

exchanges, and it involved the Orioles first traveling to Havana for a baseball game in March, after which the Cuban national team traveled to Baltimore in May, respectively leading to a 3-2 win for the Orioles and a 12-6 win for the Cubans. At first glance, this baseball exchange seems a great incentive for improved US-Cuban relations, as history has shown that baseball relations were an important aspect of their relationship, at times even enduring the longest. However, criticism has been raised that the maximum effect had not been reached, mainly due to a lack of diplomatic input during this US-Cuban baseball exchange. Whereas “the U.S. media portrayed this cultural exchange as ‘baseball diplomacy,’ [...] no U.S. government officials were involved in the negotiations in Havana [...] nor did any U.S. government officials attend either game,” (Carter 579) meaning that “there was no unified effort by either state to use this moment to their diplomatic advantage” (Martinen 20), leading to the understanding that it was an attempt to play the sports card at the highest level of diplomacy that has failed (Shearer 55). It has even been argued that the 1999 exchange was “typical of the U.S. government’s approach to Cuba: it sought to prevent Cuban and American citizens’ efforts at public diplomacy” (Garofalo 26).

On the contrary, there have also been positive impressions of the 1999 baseball games between the Orioles and Cuba, as it “helped interject a new narrative into an environment traditionally controlled by Castro’s propaganda” (Goldberg 67), might have “laid the groundwork for some sort of normalization of athletic relations between the two nations” (Noyes 47) as it was a “series of people to people exchanges [as] the US-Cuban relations [...] were put in the baseball field” (Trikaliotis 50). These mixed perceptions thus show the discrepancy between on the one hand positive views about this baseball exchange as it was beneficial for US-Cuban relations, but on the other hand the notion that it was not used to its full potential due to a lack of diplomatic implementation. Through this 1999 exchange, baseball represents the tedious improvement to US-Cuban relations, while at the same time representing a lack of diplomatic extension that could have meant a breakthrough in contemporary US-Cuban relations.

The early twenty-first century has seen very few baseball interactions and exchanges between the United States and Cuba. Significant exceptions are Carter’s and Castro’s first pitches during an all-star baseball game in Havana in 2002 and various controversies regarding the 2006 World Baseball Classic. A turning point occurred in October 2015, when the American and Cuban embassies in Washington and Havana reopened, thereby diplomatically recognizing each other again. It is therefore valuable to analyze the ways in

which baseball has been implemented and has represented US-Cuban relations from 2015 onwards, as research on this period is scarce.

Chapter II. Rediscovering Baseball as a Diplomatic Tool

US-Cuban relations from 2015 onwards have been defined by policy changes that were announced in December 2014, which laid the foundation for the ‘Cuban thaw,’ or the gradual warming of the relationship between the US and Cuba. President Obama defined the reopening of diplomatic relations with Cuba as one of “the most significant changes in our policy in more than fifty years,” and promised to “end an outdated approach that, for decades, has failed to advance our interests, and instead we will begin to normalize relations between our two countries” (Obama, “Statement”). Although diplomatic relations were officially restored with the reopening of the Cuban and American embassies in August 2015 and is thus officially the starting point of this chapter, the last two years of the Obama presidency in general saw improvements in US-Cuban relations. This is typified by the removal of Cuba from the US State Sponsors of Terrorism List in April 2015, and amendments to the Cuban Assets Control Regulations (CACR) in March 2016 to “permit Cuban citizens in the United States to receive a salary from U.S. companies” (Zaworska 138). Obama’s greatest achievement came in March 2016 with a diplomatic visit to Cuba and official meetings with Raúl Castro and other Cuban state officials, as well as ordinary Cuban people, thereby having economic, political, and entrepreneurial conversations. The trip “showed the work and effort physically that each country attempted to put into the potential reopening of relations” (Harral 56-7), thereby showing a promising cornerstone for improved relations. The only significant legislation regarding Cuba, however, during the remaining time of Obama’s presidency after this historical visit was the first scheduled flight from the United States to Cuba in August 2016, and the repeal of the ‘wet foot, dry foot policy,’ thereby no longer “making it possible for Cubans who arrived by boat and touched dry soil to stay in the United States legally” (Zaworska 137), meaning that the Cuba visit did not live up to its diplomatic, legal, political, economic, cultural, or entrepreneurial expectations.

Donald Trump’s presidency was dominated by a reversal of the progress that the Obama administration had made in the thawing of US-Cuban relations, as the Republican took a harsher stance against Cuba, thereby reinstating the Cold War-feeling of animosity between the two countries. Initial annulments in legislation came at the expense of travel and business, as, according to himself, “the previous administration’s easing of restrictions on travel and trade does not help the Cuban people – they only enrich the Cuban regime [...] Therefore, effective immediately, I am cancelling the last administration’s completely one-

sided deal with Cuba” (Trump, “Remarks”). Ironically, it is exactly this approach that appears to be one-sided, and it was the same approach of imposing restrictions on Cuba on behalf of United States’ values that resulted in an absolute low-point in US-Cuban relations. Two years later, further travel restrictions came in power with a prohibition of Cuban yachts and private planes on US soil, together with increased sanctions to pressure the Cuban government as US policy had increasingly shifted towards antagonism (Bader). With the end of his presidency in sight, Trump also placed Cuba back on the US State Sponsors of Terrorism List in January 2021, while peculiarly refraining from re-closing the embassies, and thus the diplomatic relations. This deterioration of US-Cuban relations has left current US president Joe Biden with the important task of restoring the relationship to the level it was before Trump, but preferably even advance beyond that stage. Biden has vowed to re-thaw US-Cuban relations but has not yet treated it as a priority. Cuban officials have already urged Biden to take, mainly economic, measures, but opposition is found in Republican-dominated US Congress. The most important occurrence during his presidency yet is the election of Miguel Díaz-Canel as first secretary of the Cuban communist party. Taking over from Raúl Castro, this means that there is no longer a member of the Castro family in the highest position of power, which opens up potential for improved communications and relations, although the Castro family still has massive influence behind the scenes.

2.1 - Revamping US-Cuban Relations through Baseball

In November 2015, a plan was initiated by Minor League Baseball Executive Lou Schwechheimer to return Minor League Baseball to Havana after the successes of the Sugar Kings were restricted by the Cold War and Fidel Castro’s communist regime. The idea was to “restore the professional baseball bond once shared by two countries long at odds, but it would be possible only in accordance with United States law and [...] with the full participation of Cuba” (Barry). This shows the complicated nature of the proposal, which is further emphasized by the lack of success or absence of future reporting on the plan. Schwechheimer has not yet succeeded in restructuring American baseball to include Cuban teams, but has meanwhile created the Caribbean Baseball Initiative, a diverse team, including two former US ambassadors, that argues that baseball “represents the ideal path to follow – a bridge – toward increased cooperation, communication and understanding. Respectful engagement through the common language of baseball, our shared passion, supports the overall development of the sport and brings many diverse countries and cultures closer

together” (CEBF). This initiative thus understands the importance of baseball for US-Cuban relations and implements the sport to increase people’s relations and improve the lives of primarily young Cubans. One month later, baseball was taken to the political level in a “three-day goodwill tour of Cuba by a group of MLB players, which included defectors such as Yasiel Puig, José Abreu, Alexcei Ramírez, and Brayan Peña” (Añorve 22). Including these Cuban baseball players, who risked their lives to be able to play in the United States, in this tour gave a powerful message that the harsh legislation was not insurmountable, but should be seen as an incentive to ease the regulations to normalize relations, especially as “Abreu went more than two years without seeing his son after he defected from Cuba in 2013, but they were reunited briefly when Abreu returned” (Kane 7) on this MLB goodwill trip in December 2015.

President Obama’s visit to Cuba in March 2016 also included a visit to the baseball match between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays, as well as a meeting with various Cuban dissidents who escaped Cuba to play baseball in the United States. Reactions by the American press were contradictory, as the visit was called “premature and that the administration’s decision to relax some prohibitions against doing business with Cuba will do little to improve the lives of ordinary Cubans while enriching the authoritarian government that runs the country” (Clark 6), and “old grievances and disputes over human rights marred a groundbreaking meeting and underscored lingering impediments to a historic thaw” (Davis and Cave 6), as well as the notion that “there were plenty of reminders that change may come slowly to this nation of 11 million people, from the detentions of dissidents just hours before Obama’s plane touched down to Cuban leader Raúl Castro’s defiant words that Cuba had no political prisoners and if it did, he would release them immediately” (Whitefield 3A). On the other hand, the visit has been reported as “a crowning moment in [Obama’s and Castro’s] ambitious effort to restore normal relations between their countries. While deep differences persist, the economic and political relationship has changed rapidly in the 15 months since the leaders vowed a new beginning” (Tampa Bay Times, 03-21, p. 1), signified by the “exhibition game to help mark the warming of U.S.-Cuba relations and the historic Obama-Castro talks” (Linthicum 10), as “with the crack of the bat and the roar of the crowd, baseball diplomacy was in full swing” (Bates 6A). These conflicting newspaper articles show both the excitement of the visit to Cuba, but at the same time a cautious approach as the ideological differences are a high barrier to overcome with this historic visit, at least in the mindset of many Americans.

During the visit to Cuba, the MLB goodwill tour of the previous December was mentioned as well, especially the remarkable story of defector José Abreu, as “President Obama used Abreu as an example of the struggles Cuban baseball players face on their journeys to play in the major leagues” (Kane 7). As quoted in a newspaper article in the *Chicago Tribune*, Obama said:

“Here’s a guy of immense talent who hadn’t seen his son for several years because he felt the only way that he could play in the big leagues and help his family was to be separated from his toddler [...] That can’t be the kind of policies we want to promote. My hope is this just becomes one more part of the stitching back together of the United States and Cuba” (ibid.).

President Obama here used an example of a societal, both economic and political, problem, as the defection of Cuban baseball players is both a consequence of the economic embargo and consequently increases illegal immigration and human trafficking. He thus understood the importance baseball played in these issues, and in acknowledging this and emphasizing the story of a national hero and renowned baseball player, president Obama employed baseball as a diplomatic tool in signifying the positive role baseball can have in improving US-Cuban relations. Abreu himself reacted by saying that it was “an honor Obama spoke of his story [...] with coverage of the Rays game playing on TV [...], Abreu said he was “very excited” for his country. “I am in shock right now,” Abreu said through a team interpreter. “If you slap my face, I can’t believe it. ... We never thought that this could happen so soon. It’s very special”” (ibid.). It is important that influential Cuban nationals also express themselves on improved US-Cuban relations, as this can only be successful through bilateral cooperation rather than the approach resembling unilateral imposition that has been enforced in the past.

In the speech that president Obama delivered during the visit, he emphasized normalized relations with the Cuban people, an end to the US policies to impose change on Cuba, and hope for a better future (B. Obama, “Remarks”), as he “spoke directly to the people of Cuba with a message of hope and reconciliation” (Bates 6A), meaning that his speech “resonated on both sides of the Florida Straits and even won grudging approval from some exiles who don’t generally favor Obama or his policies” (Whitefield 3A). Obama thus played into the narrative that this visit was not limited to diplomatic talks, but also to improve people-to-people’s relations, as these are also an important part of an overall relationship between two countries. He therefore concluded his speech by saying that “for all of politics, people are people, and Cubans are Cubans” (Obama “Remarks”) in “trying to lay the vestiges of the Cold War to rest” (Whitefield 3A). “The President delivered his address in the Gran

Teatro de La Habana Alicia Alonso. This national theater is adjacent to the central park in Old Havana. Its capacity is 1,100, but the speech was broadcast to millions over TV and radio stations across Cuba” (Bates 6A), thereby showing the magnitude and high Cuban interest of Obama’s visit. Obama also referred to Jackie Robinson, the first black MLB player in history, in his speech, by saying that “our players will compete on the same Havana field that Jackie Robinson played on before he made his Major League debut” (Obama “Remarks”). As explained, Cuban baseball players played an important role in breaking the color barrier, and in mentioning this historical achievement while visiting Cuba, the former president acknowledged the importance of both racial equality and the role that Cuban baseball players played in this development. Although it was just one sentence in the speech, baseball was thereby used as a diplomatic tool by connecting social problems to the national pastime of both countries.

In the press briefing prior to the visit, Deputy National Security Advisor Rhodes called the trip an attempt “to make the process of normalization irreversible” (“Press Call”), and baseball was thus used as a tool in achieving this. The irreversibility did not succeed, however, as President Trump later canceled a deal between the MLB and the Cuban Baseball Federation (CBF), consequently meaning that Cuban players were no longer allowed to join professional baseball teams in the United States. Efforts have thus been made to improve US-Cuban relations through baseball, but this has not been done in an effective or permanent manner. President Obama saw the potential of baseball in the process of normalization of US-Cuban relation, as he incorporated it twice in his visit to Cuba. It was challenging to improve relations irreversibly given the relative short time that was left in his presidency, but still he showed a willingness to make these so-important efforts for improved relations.

2.2 - Baseball as a Tool of Public Diplomacy

Given baseball’s important place in the history of US-Cuban relations, it could definitely be used as a tool in order to improve the current cultural and informal relationship between the two countries. The Cuban thaw that was initiated at the end of 2014 has seen progress, especially with president Obama’s efforts regarding his visit to Cuba in 2016. This tour is arguably the closest that the United States and Cuba have actually been to normalized relations, and it is significant that baseball played a role in this visit, thereby both meeting with Raúl Castro and enhancing Cuban people-to-people relations, as “his appearance provided the Cuban people with a specific gauge on the level of seriousness regarding the

potential re-opening of relations” (Harral 56). Given that baseball is the national pride for many Cubans, the fact that the president of the United States acknowledged this and made time and effort to be present during a match between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays showed his understanding of the importance of baseball in Cuba. Despite this visit, no other instances have taken place where baseball was implemented as an instrument for stronger diplomatic relations, and this is a missed opportunity. Especially because of the special place that baseball has in both Cubans’ and Americans’ hearts, baseball has the power to be the decisive incentive for irreversibly improved US-Cuban relations. Baseball alone is not merely enough to establish a positive relationship, but it can definitely be the initial impulse that facilitates the right environment to work with. Applying the snowball effect to US-Cuban relations, baseball should be given the chance to set the period of true change in motion. This can be done through various ways, thereby indirectly ameliorating some of the most repressive issues that currently obstruct improved US-Cuban relations.

As explained, exchanges and increased interaction between Cuba and the United States can lead to economic, entrepreneurial, and touristic opportunities. Another possible side-effect of this expanded cooperation is that it works as a gateway to an increase in mutual understanding and recognition. In the current state of affairs, both countries regard each other as adversaries and therefore neglect to cooperate and grow closer together. It is exactly this cooperation in distinct sectors, however, that can lead to a significant change in attitude towards ‘the other,’ as Cuba and the United States may realize that they are not that dissimilar after all. In order for this cooperation to work, it is beneficial that all layers of both societies cooperate, as improved US-Cuban relations will not just be realized through political or governmental action, but also not only through improved people-to-people relations. These steps were being taken by the Obama administration, most significantly during his visit to Cuba, albeit slowly. President Obama, for instance, “participated in the Cuba-U.S. business forum, where he exchanged with Cuban workers from both the state and non-state sectors” (CubaDebate) in between the “talks with the President of the Councils of State and Ministers, Army General Raúl Castro Ruz” (ibid.) and the baseball game on the final day of his visit. The agricultural sector was also involved in this visit, as “Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who was in Cuba with a host of other Cabinet members, also announced that U.S. industry-funded research and marketing programs would be working with Cuba on research and agricultural productivity, nutrition, food security and sustainable resource management exchanges” (Whitefield 3A). The agriculture sector is a specifically sensitive sector, as Fidel Castro’s agricultural reforms after the revolution indirectly led to the still-existing embargo.

By discussing agricultural cooperation regardless of this historical value, president Obama showed a willingness to truly bring improvements to US-Cuban relations. From a Cuban perspective, their openness to participate showed the same degree of eagerness to facilitate change.

Another instance of baseball diplomacy occurred one month later in April 2016 on a micro level scale, as eleven young Vermont Little League baseball players spent their spring break in Havana. This trip was sponsored by the not-for-profit Cuban American Friendship Society, whose mission is “to build community by fostering connections between the people of Cuba and the United States [and] to discuss issues that are of mutual concern and interest to people in Cuba and the United States [...] to develop meaningful people-to-people connections between Cuba and the United States” (CAFS). The baseball team spent time “learning about Cuba’s intense passion for baseball, seeing cultural and historic sights, getting to meet some of Cuba’s best professional baseball players, making new friends despite language barriers and playing baseball against local teams” (Murphree). In building these relational bridges, the exchange attempted to bring developments to the local Cuban baseball teams, as “the Vermont team brought multiple sets of jerseys in bright colors to give away. Plus the group had raised funds in Vermont to bring everything from dental floss, pencils and Life Savers to baseballs, gloves, cleats and batting helmets to give away to their Cuban counterparts” (ibid.). According to coach Carter, who accompanied the Little League team, “what our players and what the Cuban players [...] did in those six days did more for government relations between our two countries has been done in the last 40 years by the governments” (ibid.). Coach Carter might be exaggerating to some extent here, but it is definitely true that exchanges such as these are also a valuable contribution to US-Cuban relations, as an improved relationship definitely does not just come from political communication and cooperation.

The most important and promising policy change from the perspective of the United States would be a partial nullification of the current Cuban embargo from the angle of baseball. In doing so, the MLB would be granted permission to negotiate with Cuban baseball teams and players about contracts and trades from Cuba to the United States and vice versa. When the transfer of Cuban baseball players to the United States is normalized in this way, the Cuban economy can grow as the quantity of money transfer will increase. It will also have positive political consequences, as the amount of Cuban baseball players who defect will decrease, thereby resulting in a decline in human trafficking, smuggling, and illegal immigration, as Cuban baseball players no longer have to risk their lives to attempt to reach

American soil to hopefully earn a contract with an American baseball team, thereby giving up their Cuban nationality and the life that they built up at home.

By altering or partially amending the legislation surrounding the Cuban embargo, an inevitable consequence is that both the American and the Cuban government, the MLB, the Federación Cubana de Béisbol (FCB), and smaller institutions and organizations will have to cooperate. Currently, this is not occurring as both countries are taking a detached attitude towards the other, which is partially rooted in the Cold War history between both countries, but also in the more recent failure to fundamentally improve US-Cuban relations. Baseball, however, can be the breakthrough in order for US-Cuban relations to improve in other fields as well, for instance in the field of tourism through eased travel restrictions or US-Cuban interactions through businesses as a result of a decrease in economic sanctions. Baseball has proven to be the one aspect that can survive the longest within the US-Cuban relationship, so it would be a logical starting point to then rebuild and restructure their relationship from there on up. Improved relations would be beneficial for both the United States and Cuba, as the economic, political, entrepreneurial, and cultural elements are not only positively affected by baseball, but make up the most important parts of the international relationship. Baseball can thus be implemented as a starting point in improved diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba, something that has been previously neglected, as a result leading to perhaps actual irreversibly diplomatic US-Cuban relations.

2.3 Baseball Means Business

Next to official diplomacy, baseball acted as a booster for facilitating economic relations between Cuba and the United States. The Major League Baseball (MLB) is perhaps the most important and influential actor in such a scheme. As of March 2021, all thirty MLB teams and franchises combined are worth \$66 billion (Sportico), thereby creating an enormous market that generates gigantic profits in the transaction of players, real estate, and gameday revenues. For example, center fielder Mike Trout signed a twelve-year contract in 2019 with the Los Angeles Angels with a total worth of \$426,500,00, including a \$20,000,000 signing bonus and an annual salary of \$35,541,667. These are extraordinary numbers that would not have been possible without MLB's current market value. This market, however, is currently mostly limited to the United States itself. Especially Cuba is excluded due to the still existing economic embargo, meaning that through various statutes, American businesses are not allowed to conduct trade with Cuban interests. As the MLB is a major American business, this

means the US-Cuban embargo applies to the MLB as well, consequently meaning that no MLB teams are allowed to negotiate with Cuban baseball teams or players. Therefore, “one company standing to benefit from the lifting of the embargo is [the MLB],” as they then “could negotiate with Cuba for the transfer of Cuban baseball players. This benefits the Cuban people because Cuban baseball players could work in the United States, making a similar salary to other professional athletes around the world without renouncing their Cuban citizenship” (Zaworska 136). This addresses a crucial consequence of the US-Cuban embargo, namely the resultative smuggling of Cuban baseball players by human traffickers in order for them to play in the United States.

Because of the fierce restrictions of the embargo, the demand for Cuban baseball players in the United States is much higher than the supply, consequently leading to extraordinary valuable contracts when one of these Cuban players does risk his life to cross the US-Cuban border in order to play baseball in the United States. “Hidden behind the million-dollar curtains and awards are their dangerous tales of human trafficking. Like Puig’s story, other stories of smuggling, guns, bribes, and danger have been slowly unveiled. These dangers can be attributed to current MLB policies that bar teams from speaking to, negotiating with, and having any affiliation with Cuba and their nationals” (Klein and Marcus 273). Yasiel Puig is indeed one of the most prominent baseball players who defected from Cuba and signed a \$42 million contract for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2012. Current restrictions under the embargo require Cuban baseball players to “establish residency in a third country before signing with an MLB team. That has led to a tortuous path for many players before joining the MLB (Añorve 17), as this means that they have to abandon their Cuban nationality, thereby also leading to the consequence that they are unable to return to Cuba as they can no longer identify as Cubans, along with the fact that Cuban defectors are seen as traitors to their country.

This disturbs US-Cuban baseball relations, as “even at the minor league level, professional baseball in America serves as a beacon of hope for many talented players from developing or struggling nations in Latin America and the Caribbean. Large contracts, incomparable in size to the average wages in their home countries, and American freedoms draw foreign players to MLB” (St. Pierre 798). As the Cuban economy is still struggling after the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuban baseball players see it as a unique opportunity to rise from these poor conditions in their home country to make a living in the United States, but the embargo makes it almost impossible for them to succeed, thereby limiting the wealth of their families in Cuba as well. In March 2016, “the Obama administration amended the CACR to

permit Cuban citizens in the United States to receive a salary from U.S. companies” (Zaworska 138), but this legislation was revoked in September 2019, when president Trump amended the Cuban Assets Control Regulations:

“With respect to remittances, the September 9, 2019 rule amends the general license authorizing family remittances to (1) place a cap of 41,000 as the maximum amount that one remitter can send to one Cuban national as a family remittance per quarter and (2) exclude close relatives of prohibited officials of the Government of Cuba or close relatives of prohibited members of the Cuban Communist Party as authorized recipients of family remittances” (U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Cuba Sanctions”).

This amendment to the legislation regarding US-Cuban relations is exemplary for the contradicting ways in which former presidents Obama and Trump perceived Cuba and their perceived importance to maintain or improve the relationship between the two countries. What they both neglected, however, are the diplomatic opportunities that lay within baseball that could mean a breakthrough in an irreversible improvement of US-Cuban relations. Its potential has definitely not yet been used, despite some superficial improvements mostly from United States’ perspective. The most significant alteration in Cuban legislation came in September 2013, when the Cuba Serie Nacional, Cuba’s national baseball league, “created a process that allow[ed] Cuban players to travel to overseas professional leagues in Mexico and Japan” (Klein and Marcus 273). The Cuban baseball league, and thereby the economic market that is inextricably connected to it, opened up to an international audience and could have been an initial step in an open Cuban baseball market. “The reality of this new system, however, is that the change in policy reflects little more than a financial opportunity for the Cuban league and Cuban teams to revive their dilapidated stadiums and outdated equipment (274). Cuba’s government is thus acting out of self-interest in attempting to improve their own economy, thereby quite uniquely opening up to an international perspective, albeit be it limited. This is done, however, exactly because of the harsh restrictions of the US embargo, thereby giving Cuba barely any opportunities to economically develop as the United States has historically been their biggest trading partner.

The embargo can thus be seen as a limitation to the potential of increased US-Cuban relations, and baseball is one of the main advantages of a decreased or a less constrained embargo. Not only can this lead to increased economic opportunities for Cuba, which can lead to a more equal market in baseball, but this can also result in a decrease of human trafficking, smuggling, and Cuban defections, thereby contributing to the overall level of human rights considerations in Cuba, the current lack thereof being one of the biggest arguments for

opponents of extended US-Cuban relations. This can for instance be seen by one of president Trump's last legislation change during his presidency, as he "designated the Cuban Ministry of Interior and the Minister of Interior, Lazaro Alberto Álvarez Casas, for serious human rights abuse [...] which builds upon and implements the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and targets perpetrators of human rights abuse and corruption around the world" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Press Release"). Thereby comes the discussion about the legality of the embargo altogether, as "opponents of the embargo claim that its legal basis is flawed" (Radtke 23), as the economic emergency measures under the Trading With the Enemy Act "may only be applied in case of war or an imminent threat to the national security" (Lamrani 44), which is not the case as the United States and Cuba have never been at war, given that Spain was the enemy at colonial times. Next to that comes the fact that it is costly for the United States to keep the embargo effective, as there are many different agencies responsible for enforcing different provisions of the embargo, such as the Departments of Commerce, Homeland Security, Justice, and the Treasury (Radtke 42). These organizations "enforce the Cuba embargo primarily by licensing and inspecting exports and travelers and by investigating and penalizing or prosecuting embargo violations" (Government Accountability Office), as well as "efforts to provide democracy assistance aimed at developing civil society and promoting freedom of information on the island" (Radtke 42) by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of State. In total, "U.S. government devotes hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of man hours to administering the embargo each year" (43). With a normalization of US-Cuban relations, these resources could be relocated and used for the improvement of the economy, instead of spending money to pursue the economic restrictions.

During Obama's visit to Cuba in March 2016, baseball also meant business as "Major League Baseball operated in its own parallel universe [...] setting up a beachhead at the Melia Cohiba Hotel and bringing a parade of baseball legends from Derek Jeter to Luis Tiant to town for the exhibition game. People were excited about the game and the players, making MLB's sports diplomacy a success" (Whitefield 3A). Baseball thus played another important role next to the increased people-to-people's relations that the exchange between the Cuban national team and the Tampa Bay Rays encouraged, as it incited cooperation on a business level. Not only the MLB was involved, as "among the companies that made announcements about new business ties were the online lodging service Airbnb, which has 4,000 Cuban listings and can now offer its services to non-U.S. customers; Carnival Corp.; which got approval to sail its Fathom line from Miami to the Port of Havana; Western Union and

Starwood Hotel & Resorts (ibid.). This gave rise to economic opportunities in mainly the entrepreneurial and tourism sectors, fueled by the visit from president Obama to Cuba and led by the business exchanges of the MLB. Baseball did thus not only work as a diplomatic tool in terms of cultural and public diplomacy, but also as a form of nation branding through diplomatic efforts.

Conclusion

This research has altogether shown that baseball has historically been an important and persistent factor in US-Cuban relations by working as a tool in cultural diplomacy, and that the sport has recently been a crucial tool in implementing both US public diplomacy and nation branding in Cuba in order to improve the bilateral relationship between the two countries. This relationship, however, has not yet been irreversibly improved, meaning that the future of US-Cuban relations is still highly ambivalent and uncertain, especially given the continuous political tension between the two countries, together with an overall shortcoming of attempts to bridge cultural differences, something that is first necessary to then establish irreversibly improved relations. Baseball has worked, and can still work, as a tool in building these bridges, and can at the same time contribute to diplomatic endeavors.

It is undeniable that baseball has played, and still plays, an important role in the diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the United States, but also in the enhancement of people-to-people relations between both countries. The extent to which improvements in US-Cuban relations can be solely attributed to baseball in and of itself is more difficult to assess, as baseball has always been a tool, a part of diplomatic endeavors, and in isolation would be dramatically less powerful. In order to produce an educated projection of the role that baseball will play in future diplomatic interactions for US-Cuban relations altogether, it is important to understand the various factors that need to be considered when attempting to answer the question to what extent baseball can still work to improve US-Cuban relations. It is impossible to include all separate aspects, but the most important ones that will be discussed are the cultural value attached to baseball both in Cuba and in the United States, the actors that are currently involved in attempting to improve US-Cuban relations through baseball, and whether or not baseball can still be considered as a valid tool to assess the status of US-Cuban relations.

The historical developments regarding US-Cuban relations through the perspective of baseball have shown that the cultural value of both countries' pastime has helped to draw the two countries closer together, thereby enhancing improved relations and initiating exchanges and interactions, both diplomatically and on an informal level. In order to evaluate to what extent baseball can still play this important role in improving US-Cuban relations, it is important to establish to what extent the cultural value of baseball is still of the same magnitude as it used to be during, for instance, times of Spanish colonialism where the

American sport of baseball helped liberate Cubans mentally and culturally from oppression, while at the same time shaping their own identity. It is difficult for baseball to equal the cultural value that it had at the beginning of US-Cuban relations, as it particularly worked as a catalyst to overcome the cultural differences between the two countries at this stage. Baseball was the common language through which the United States and Cuba could communicate with each other, which was especially favorable at times of few political and diplomatic interaction and cooperation. Given the struggles and conflicts that both countries have now gone through with or because of each other, the strength of baseball as the common cultural aspect has decreased. Nonetheless, baseball can definitely still work favorably in order to once again attempt to improve US-Cuban relations, as it is still of tremendous importance for both Americans and Cubans. The ways in which baseball can best be effectively implemented, however, have altered. Exhibition games that merely display American values and sportive qualities are insufficient, as baseball is then not connected with politics or diplomacy. Collective efforts have to be taken by both governments, the MLB, the CBF, and potentially companies and businesses as well, in order to create exchanges that can truly make a difference in the diplomatic sphere. This leads to the second aspect that defines the extent to which baseball can improve US-Cuban relations, namely the actors that are currently investing in baseball, as this is of importance for the effectiveness of an implementation of baseball in cultural or public diplomacy.

During the Obama presidency, the administration was actively involved in attempting to improve the US-Cuban relationship, both diplomatically, politically, and culturally. Given that the American president himself went on a visit to Cuba as part of this development in irreversible improvements, the tool of political power seems to be the most powerful, as political action allows for cultural and diplomatic action to take place as well. When political action was taken, for instance, to once more limit travel possibilities from the United States to Cuba, this inevitably led to a decrease in US-Cuban interactions and exchanges. This means that political actions are the foundation for improvements in US-Cuban relations, but there is currently a substantial lack thereof. This means that the emphasis has recently shifted to Cuban and American businesses, organizations, foundations, and institutes, which play an increasingly important role in establishing and improving positive US-Cuban relations through baseball. The consequential impact on cultural diplomacy is different as to public diplomacy conducted by both governments, but still has the power to utilize baseball as a diplomatic tool in order to improve the US-Cuban relationship. This leads to the issue,

however, whether or not baseball is still the most popular, and thus most useful, tool for diplomacy as it has proven to be in the long history between the United States and Cuba.

Baseball has been the binding factor between the United States and Cuba through history, but for the national pastime to still be an effective diplomatic tool, it still needs to have that defining and decisive importance that it has had in the past. It is possible that baseball was more important to the generation that has lived through the Cold War than it is for later generations of both Cubans and Americans that have not grown up in times of war or conflict, thereby indicating a potential scope for further research. The situation between both countries is still substandard, but the value of baseball as one of the few remaining familiar activities, both professionally to watch and leisurely to perform, during times of active conflict is higher, especially for Cubans. More young Cubans now resort to soccer, not only contributable to the recently improving performances by the Cuban national team as they won the 2012 Caribbean Cup and made it to the quarterfinals of the Gold Cups in 2013 and 2015, but also as “top-flight soccer games from around the world have become widely available on Cuban TV” (Baxter). There also seems to be a slight decline in the quality of the Cuban national baseball team, as they failed to qualify for the Olympics for the first time in history in 2021. As the Cuban government is still restricting Cuban professional athletes to transfer to international competitions, Cuban professional soccer players are just as limited as their baseball counterparts. It thus seems that under the current Cuban regime, diplomatic improvements in US-Cuban relations through sports will always experience difficulties, as a free flow of players, and thus culture and capital, can increase the effectiveness of sports as a diplomatic tool.

Hence, if baseball has been effectively implemented as diplomatic tool in the past, it will very likely be difficult to continue on this trend in the near future. On a governmental level, both the Cuban and United States’ government have plenty to improve in terms of both policy and communication in order to pursue positive developments in their relationship, but the continued ideological differences hamper this development. As both countries are currently in a transitional stage where their leaders have recently switched, priorities lay on domestic politics and, especially for the United States, international conflicts with a higher degree of urgency. Therefore, the US-Cuban relationship at the moment is not of the upmost importance for neither two countries, thereby potentially harming and deteriorating the improvements made during the Obama administration.

The importance of Cuban and American businesses and private organizations has also increased, as they can also make considerable contributions to improved US-Cuban relations.

It is difficult to assess the exact influence they have, as well as the concrete changes that they can make, as they often do not have an official policy or agenda like governments do. Once more, communication is crucial in these US-Cuban interactions and exchanges, as baseball has the power to overcome cultural and ideological differences, but these can be negated by poor or unclear communication, showing the careful path these organizations have to walk to not only represent their own interests, but also those of the other country. Further research can definitely be conducted on the impact of these baseball interactions and exchanges by American and Cuban organizations and businesses, for the majority impacting cultural diplomacy. In terms of public diplomacy, it would be beneficial if more research is conducted on the prospects of the current governments in both the United States and Cuba, respectively led by president Biden and president Díaz-Canel.

This thesis has already mentioned the resemblance between US-Cuban relations and a baseball field, especially because of the sense of circularity and the inescapable interconnection between the two countries due to their passion for baseball. While the two countries have now played ball for more than 150 years, the game is still not decided. Whereas the United States has considerably more power than Cuba on the stage of world politics and has more often than not attempted to impose their democratic values on Cuba, all indifferences are set aside when they set foot on a baseball field, unrelated whether this is on American or Cuban territory. Through history, baseball has proven to be an unprecedented binding factor, but this was in times when the sport was the unequivocal national pastime for both countries. During absolute low-points, baseball remained the one aspect of connection between the two countries. On the contrary, the peak of US-Cuban relations also occurred in times of baseball interaction. Baseball alone has not, cannot, and will not save or irreversibly improve the relationship between the United States. However, it has proven to be an effective tool for both cultural and public diplomacy, and should therefore be seen as one of the ways forward for US-Cuban relations, especially because of the powerful cultural bridge that it builds between the United States and Cuba. It can for instance be implemented in order to improve strenuous political situations that currently hamper improvements to US-Cuban relations such as illegal immigration and Cuban baseball defectors. These issues are both still highly relevant today, as at the end of May 2021, Cuban baseball player César Prieto defected after having obtained a US visa, “for which the players filed applications in three other countries due to US sanctions that prevented the US consulate in Havana from issuing the documents” (Chicago Sun Times, 05-27), thereby showing the current relevance and urgency of this matter. These restrictive regulations and legislations only work as a catalyst for Cuban

baseball players to flee their country and immigrants to illegally cross the border, as they see no other option to escape this cruel way of living. Although it will be incredibly difficult, baseball can still work as a diplomatic tool for US-Cuban relations on the condition that it is implemented together with other diplomatic tools in the fields of culture, economics, and entrepreneurship. Only when a collective effort is made to improve the relationship between the United States and Cuba permanently, baseball can still make a difference, or at least be a significant part of that difference; only then can the United States and Cuba hit a collective homerun.

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