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**Landis and Baseball  
Before Jackie Robinson**

Does Baseball Deserve This Black Eye?

NORMAN L. MACHT, RICHARD CREPEAU, LEE LOWENFISH

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# Does Baseball Deserve This Black Eye?

*A Dissent from the Universal Casting of Shame and Blame on  
Kenesaw Mountain Landis for Baseball's Failure to Sign Black Players Before 1946*

Norman L. Macht

*This article is adapted from a research presentation given at the 2007 SABR annual convention.*

AT SABR's 2006 convention one speaker analyzed the commissioners of baseball and rated Judge Landis the best of all. In the question-and-answer session that followed, a member of the audience challenged the speaker: "How can you stand here in the year 2006 and praise Landis, who was so instrumental in keeping blacks out of Major League Baseball?"

Had I been the presenter, I would have replied, "How do you know that Landis was so instrumental in barring blacks?"

How do we know anything that we *think* we know? By what means do we know it? By taking somebody else's word for it? By reading it in two or three or six places and concluding that it must be true? Or by researching and analyzing the pieces objectively and independently?

What we think we know about the past is laced with uncertainty. There's very little we can be sure about. We must be open to challenging what we think we know when we come across contrary evidence, or across something that doesn't quite fit. That's not easy.

Once we form an opinion or reach a conclusion, it's natural to stop searching and therefore stop thinking. The mind stays closed and refuses to accept other findings that might discredit that opinion.

In medicine this is called confirmation bias: confirming what you expect to find in your research by selectively accepting this or ignoring that and clinging to a single explanation arrived at earlier without considering other possibilities.

Then I would have reminded the judge's critic that, yes, it's precisely because we are standing here in 2006, and Landis and baseball's club owners were operating in a different time and a different society. A historian who judges a man in the context of today's time and standards and not the standards and conditions of the time in which the subject lived commits a scholarly sin. The attempt to understand people in their context and on their terms requires that we temporarily suspend judgment. Understanding the America of the 1920s and '30s and '40s obliges us to make the

effort of not judging it by the standards and values of today. Their values were their values, not necessarily ours. As Gibbon wrote of the Roman general Balisarius, "His vices were the vices of his time; his virtues were his own." This forces us to remove the halo of thinking our values are eternal. They are not, and that can be troubling to us.

There is a vast, unbridgeable distance between what we like to believe we always were as a society and what we really were. Most of us never knew that pre-World War II society, never lived there. I ask you to join me now in trying to cross that bridge, leaving behind the baggage of your values and biases and what you think you know about other people in other times.

America was a racist society in the first half of the twentieth century. A society is not a soulless abstraction. It is people; in this case, the white majority of America—our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents.

They grew up in a time when populists like William Jennings Bryan and William Allen White openly opposed any form of integration. Newspapers and popular music regularly used terms like *coons* and *darkies*. The president of Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson, addressed a group of alumni on February 8, 1903. Referring to Teddy Roosevelt's nomination of a black man to be customs collector in Charleston, South Carolina, Wilson drew laughs when he joked, "The groundhog has returned to its burrow because it feared that Roosevelt would put a coon in to replace him."

Americans went to movies where blacks, except for musicians and dancers, were cast as maids and mammies like Hattie McDaniel, fluttery caricatures like Butterfly McQueen, or slow-witted Stepin Fetchits. Joe Louis was admired by whites because he *knew his place* and was *a credit to his race*. When I was young, those phrases were in common use.

Even later, two Brooklyn Dodgers heroes, Southern-born Red Barber and Pee Wee Reese, admitted that everything in their upbringing had imbued in them the belief that the black man was inferior. Reese told author and historian Jules Tygiel, "You hear this all your life, you believe it."<sup>1</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan was as strong in the Midwest as in the South, dominating city halls and chambers of commerce in the 1920s. Klan dinners and dances were covered as social news on the front pages of small-town newspapers. In 1925 they almost elected one of their own as mayor of Detroit. There were Klan members in major-league clubhouses.

In 1926, New York sportswriter Joe Vila wrote:

Stories are in circulation that certain major league managers are having trouble with their players who are hostile to members of the Ku Klux Klan. A few years ago one of the Western teams was said to have been disrupted by serious clashes on religion.

According to the gossips, several managers, opposed to the Klan, have been getting rid of members who are members of the hooded order, regardless of their skill as batters and fielders. If such conditions exist they should be investigated by the bosses of Organized Baseball.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1930s many blacks went north in search of a better life. Northern whites who deplored Southern customs when the problem was far away were less generous in their support when the victims arrived at their doorsteps.

From Maryland to California there were lynchings every year until the 1950s. Respectable citizens who did not take part stood by and condoned them. In 1933 the governor of California went so far as to declare a lynching in his state “a fine lesson for the whole nation.”

In 1937, a federal antilynching bill was filibustered by Southern Democrats in the Senate, tying up all Senate business. Editorials all over the country urged that the antilynching bill be abandoned so other business could be done, and it was. The fact is that in prewar America civil rights and equal opportunity were nowhere on this society’s agenda.

From 1933 to 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt never proposed a single civil-rights law, never supported efforts to pass a federal antilynching law, never pushed Congress, which had jurisdiction over the District of Columbia, to end any aspect of segregation there.

In 1941 it took the threat of a march on Washington to force the president to issue an order ending discrimination in employment in defense industries. Yet nobody accuses FDR of being a racist.

As late as 1948 no city was more tightly segregated than Washington, D.C.—churches, hospitals, schools, universities, hotels, restaurants, lunch counters, parks, department stores. Blacks could be served at some

*Despite his background—his father and grandfather were vocal abolitionists and two of his brothers were elected to Congress over Klan-backed candidates—Kenesaw Mountain Landis (1866–1944) is often supposed to have harbored a tacit racism that led him to resist integration of Major League Baseball during a period when segregation was still the status quo in much of American society.*



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lunch counters but they had to stand—and the dishes they used were smashed instead of washed when they were done. Even if they could buy something in a store, you wouldn’t find any blacks working behind the counter. City and federal offices were almost all-white. Anyone could ride the streetcars and buses, but only whites could drive them. The code of ethics of the Washington real-estate board, which included all the leading banks and title companies as well as realtors, included this statement: “No property in a white section should ever be sold, rented, advertised, or offered to colored people.”<sup>3</sup> This was the rule, not the exception, throughout the country. The Supreme Court didn’t ban restrictive covenants until 1948.

We’re not talking about Klansmen in sheets and hoods but the business elite of the nation. In a 1939 survey, 53 percent of Americans polled said Jews should be restricted in their lives and occupations. Resort hotels advertised that they were “restricted,” which meant no Jews allowed. For blacks that had long been the reality.

Terrifying deadly riots in Chicago and Washington in 1919 had left deep scars on our ancestors, who were in no mood for any form of integration. In 1933, Ohio State University barred blacks from on-campus housing and restaurants. When the Ohio Supreme Court upheld the university’s right to deny housing to a black coed, the school president, George Rightmire, said, “Knowing the feelings in Ohio, can the administration take the burden of establishing this relationship—colored and white girls living in this more or less family way?”<sup>4</sup>

This was Ohio—not the deep South.

Knowing the feelings in Ohio, could you blame Cincinnati Reds owner Powell Crosley and Cleveland Indians owner Alva Bradley for not putting “colored and white” boys together in “this more or less family way” in their clubhouses?

The mood of America—including its baseball fans—in May 1940 was illustrated by an editor at the *Philadelphia Record* deciding, against the advice of the sports department, to begin a campaign urging the

city's two major-league teams to sign Negro players.

One month later in the "Press Box" column in *The Sporting News*, there appeared this interesting item: "That Philadelphia A.M. sheet has stopped its agitation to get Negro players in the majors because of the reactions of its white readers."

On July 16, 1942, a letter from General Eisenhower's adjutant general went to the Red Cross in London directing that black and white army personnel be segregated as much as possible. It said, "It is believed that to avoid friction between white and Negro soldiers, care should be taken so that men of the two races are not needlessly intermingled in the same dormitory or at the same table in dining halls."<sup>5</sup>

That same year the Missouri legislature killed a civil-rights bill that would have given blacks equal access to public parks, theaters, and restaurants.

In 1943 race riots in Detroit forced the postponement of a game at Briggs Stadium. Federal troops were called in and stayed for six months. There were similar riots in Harlem and Los Angeles that summer.

In August 1944 there was a weeklong transit strike in Philadelphia. What was it about? The upgrading of eight Negroes to jobs formerly held exclusively by whites. Ten thousand union members shut down the city, the nation's third-largest war production center, because they didn't want blacks taking white drivers' jobs. Blacks were fit only for menial jobs—janitors and mechanics and the like. Roosevelt sent in 5,000 troops and averted a major riot, but 300 storefronts were smashed in the black North Philadelphia neighborhood.

If you were the 81-year-old Connie Mack, with your life and assets invested in the Athletics, would you have stood up to those strikers and risked your business and personal safety by telling them that blacks were equal to whites and you were going to sign black players who would take white players' jobs?

I don't think so.

The same thing was true in Washington, where there was a wartime shortage of motormen and conductors. The transit company advertised for workers—white only—in cities as far as 200 miles away, despite the availability of qualified blacks in the city. Both the union and the CIO claimed that race riots would occur if blacks were hired for those positions.

When the D.C. fire chief proposed that black firemen be transferred to fill the many vacancies at white fire stations, he was attacked in a resolution passed by the AF of L Firemen's Local. At this same time the CIO and AF of L were joining black sportswriters in berating Clark Griffith for not integrating MLB.

Hypocrisy thrived in those days too.



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"Landis Clears Way for Owners to Hire Colored," according to a headline in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1942, but Larry MacPhail of the *Dodgers* insisted that club owners observed "an unwritten law . . . on the subject of the racial issue."

In 1937, Griffith had told *Baltimore Afro-American* sports editor Sam Lacy, "I know the time will come, but the climate isn't right. We wouldn't have the support of society." He was right. And Lacy conceded that baseball's integration was an unrealistic goal at that time. Incidentally, Griffith Stadium was the only nonsegregated public place of amusement in Washington.

Negro Leagues star Leon Day later said, "They couldn't have signed any black players in the 1930s even if they wanted to. It would have been suicide for the club owners and murder for the players."<sup>6</sup>

This was the society that Kenesaw Mountain Landis, born in 1866, grew up in and lived in. Now that we've placed him in his time, let's look at the charges leveled against him. Landis was a racist because

- he was solely or primarily responsible for preventing blacks from playing in the major leagues;
- as the czar of baseball, he had the power to force club owners to sign Negro Leaguers.

Let's first look at the background of the man. There is no documentation of anything racist Landis ever did or said in or out of baseball. In researching his biography of Landis, David Pietrusza looked long and hard to find something. He found nothing. On the contrary, Landis's family influences point the other way. His grandfather and father were outspoken abolitionists. Two of his brothers were elected to Congress in Indiana over Klan-backed candidates at a time when the Klan was strong and active there, and very few politicians dared to speak out on the issue of prejudice. They remained fierce opponents of the Klan all their lives.

When Landis was criticized by some congressmen for remaining as a federal judge after his appointment as commissioner in 1921, he was praised by black preachers in Chicago for his leniency and fairness toward black youths brought before him. This editorial appeared in a black newspaper:

*The Chicago Advocate*, speaking for the entire race, wishes to extend to Judge Landis their appreciation for his fair and impartial justice handed out regardless of race or creed. . . . We, the Negroes of this portion of the country, are thoroughly satisfied with the decisions of Judge Landis, and have no fault whatever to find with them. All of the Negroes ever convicted by him have been proven guilty beyond all reasonable doubt.

Landis was 54 years old at that time. If he was a racist, he either had a lot of people fooled or he became one overnight and pretty late in life.

What about this myth that Landis was an all-powerful dictator who could bully or force club owners to sign black players? How do you think that would go over in cities torn by riots and strikes, and in clubhouses torn between pro- and anti-Klansmen? In truth, Landis had no authority to tell any club owners whom to sign or how to spend their money.

If Landis was really so powerful, he would have abolished the one aspect of baseball he truly hated and fought—the farm system. But he couldn't. In 1948, when a rule restricting control of bonus players was passed, Jim Gallagher, general manager of the Cubs, said the new rule did something that Landis had tried and failed to accomplish.

“For 25 years,” Gallagher said, “Commissioner Landis struggled to loosen the regulations by which major league clubs could control the careers of players for periods as long as nine years. He succeeded in reducing this term of control, which was made by slow advancement in the farm system and subsequent options by major league clubs, to six years.”<sup>7</sup>

That was as much as this so-called czar could do in 25 years of trying. As for the charge that Landis prevented blacks from playing in the major leagues, there is no evidence that he ever stopped any club owner from signing a black player. None. Ever.

More than once he said there was not and never had been any rule barring blacks. And there wasn't.

But of course, if you are bent on condemning him, you have to call him a liar. You have no basis for it, but it might make you feel better to believe it because it enables you to identify a villain and close the case—and your mind.

More than once Landis said, “If [anybody] wants to sign one or 25 Negro players, it is all right with me. That is the business of the manager and the club owners. The business of the Commissioner is to interpret the rules and enforce them.”

When he said it on July 17, 1942, the *Afro-American* ran the headline “Landis Clears Way for Owners to Hire Colored.” Sports editor Art Carter made it clear that it was up to any owner “willing to blaze the trail in breaking down the bar against colored players.”

Larry MacPhail of the Brooklyn Dodgers responded, “Judge Landis was not speaking for baseball when he said there was no barrier; there has been an unwritten law tantamount to an agreement between major league clubs on the subject of the racial issue.”

An agreement between major-league clubs—that's the key. Landis never stopped anybody. No club owner had ever tried to sign a black player. In the words of feminist Carrie Chapman Carr, “No written law has ever been more binding than unwritten custom supported by popular opinion.” And that's the way it was.

Unlike stores and restaurants and theaters, baseball clubs were interdependent. The owners' report of 1946 pointed out, “The individual action of any one club . . . could conceivably result in lessening the value of several major league franchises.”

Horace Stoneham might have felt that New Yorkers would accept a black player in 1938 or '40 or '42 (in 1954, Milton Gross reported in the *New York Post* that Stoneham admitted he had tried to sign a black player three years before the signing of Jackie Robinson), but what would happen when the Giants took the field in Philadelphia or Cincinnati or St. Louis? Nobody knew.

The club owners were like the businessmen who ran the theaters and restaurants and stores and hotels. Their business depended on the goodwill of their customers, many of whom were just like those white strikers who considered colored people inferior and a threat to take the white man's job. What would happen if black players drew too many black fans? And if a black player got into a fight on the field or argued with an umpire—who knew what might spark a riot in the bleachers? We can sit here now and smugly say their fears were groundless, and maybe they were, but they were real at the time—make no mistake about that. Remember, most of us weren't there as witnesses 65 or 70 years ago, when America was a very different place.

Racism had nothing to do with Major League Baseball not signing black players in prewar America—and everything to do with it. But it was not the racism of

club owners Connie Mack and Clark Griffith and Spike Briggs and Tom Yawkey and Bill DeWitt and Don Barnes and the Comiskeyes and Ruppert and Stoneham and Wrigley and Crosley and Bob Quinn and Bill Benswanger and Branch Rickey—and Landis—but the racism of their customers, our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents.

Yes, I included Branch Rickey in that list. In his thoroughly documented biography of Rickey, Lee Lowenfish points out that Rickey's home was St. Louis. He had been there for 30 years. He didn't want to leave. Had Cardinals owner Sam Breadon not fired him in 1942, he would have stayed in St. Louis and there might have been no signing of Jackie Robinson. Rickey knew that St. Louis was too much of a Southern city to risk integration in the 1930s and early '40s. Sportsman's Park had a colored-only seating section for as long as Rickey was there. It was the last major-league park to be desegregated—after he left. Members of Rickey's family told Lowenfish that he just couldn't have broken the color line in St. Louis. So you cannot honestly label all the other owners as racists and not include Rickey, whose thinking was essentially the same as theirs—economic, risk-averse, uncertain of the social consequences.

When Branch Rickey moved to Brooklyn, Judge Landis was still commissioner. In early 1943, Rickey revealed to the Dodgers board of directors his plans to scout Negro Leaguers. He didn't talk about being ready to sign them when and if Landis died or resigned or was fired. That was significant; he knew Landis was not the barrier. Rickey was anticipating the end of the war, when American society might have changed enough to accept the integration of the major leagues—maybe. He couldn't have been encouraged by the race riots in Detroit, New York, and Los Angeles that summer

Judge Landis died on November 25, 1944. Nobody rushed to sign black players now that his supposed ban was no longer there. Club owners didn't fall all over themselves outbidding each other for the biggest Negro League stars. A whole year passed before Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson to a Montreal contract—after the war ended. Ten years after Landis and his mythical ban were gone, half the major-league clubs still had no black players.

In many baseball histories you read the shame-filled aside that, well, of course it was the national game except that African Americans were not allowed in. Well, blacks weren't allowed in any other part of white American life in those days. The fact is that Major League Baseball was not the shame of the nation, reac-



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*Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in baseball in 1947 might never have happened had Cardinals owner Sam Breadon not fired Branch Rickey in 1942. Sportsman's Park in St. Louis was the last major-league park to be desegregated and in the 1940s would have been a difficult venue in which to introduce integration into Major League Baseball.*

tionary, behind the times. Baseball led the nation, integrating ten months before Harry Truman became the first president to send a civil-rights message to Congress, a year before integration of the armed forces, three years before the first black player was taken in the NBA draft, and way ahead of the nation's political mood. Washington was still sharply segregated. Throughout Jackie Robinson's first year with the Dodgers, there was not a single mention in any Washington newspaper of any statement by any congressman—from anywhere—that was critical of the segregation policies still in effect in the capital. Baseball does not deserve this black eye. It deserves recognition for leading—dragging—the rest of America a little closer to the ultimate goal of equality of opportunity.

And you can look it up. ■

## Notes

1. Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
2. Joe Vila, *New York Sun*, 1926.
3. Harry S. Wender, survey, *Washington Post*, 8 May 1949; Kenesaw M. Landis (commissioner's nephew) and Tom P. Barrett, *Segregation in Washington: A Report*, November 1948 [Chicago, 1948].
4. William J. Baker, *Jesse Owens: An American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1986).
5. Harry C. Butcher, *Three Years with Eisenhower: The Personal Diary of Captain Harry C. Butcher, USNR, Naval Aide to General Eisenhower, 1942 to 1945* (London: Heinemann, [1946]).
6. Sam Lacy and Leon Day, interviews with author.
7. Jim Gallagher, *The Sporting News*, 7 July 1948, p. 6

# Landis, Baseball, and Racism

*A Brief Comment*

Richard Crepeau

IN HIS essay “Does Baseball Deserve This Black Eye?” Norman Macht raises a number of questions. First is the question embedded in the title, a question he doesn’t address until his concluding comments. Second, he asks how it is known that Judge Landis was instrumental in barring blacks from baseball. This second question occupies much more of Macht’s attention than the first. In addition Macht devotes considerable effort to demonstrating that the United States was a racist society through the first half of the twentieth century. To expend this much effort on a truth that has now reached axiomatic status seems odd, but there is a logic to Macht’s approach.

Before addressing these issues let me just mention two points of fact raised by Macht that I would question as proof of anything. First, to blame baseball’s failure to desegregate on the customers—or, as Macht would have it, “our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents”—is ludicrous. The customers no more controlled the racial makeup of baseball than they controlled the rules of the game, the price of tickets, the salaries of players, or the profits of the owners.

Second, that baseball led the nation by integrating before either Truman’s civil-rights legislation or the desegregation of the NBA is, although true, a diversionary claim. Macht’s claim conveniently ignores the fact that the NFL was the first professional sport to desegregate, that African Americans were playing intercollegiate sports all through its history, and that President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 8802, by which he created the Fair Employment Practices Commission, was issued in 1941, well before the desegregation of baseball.

But I digress.

What Macht offers as one of his main arguments supporting Landis is that the commissioner was a product of his times. He was immersed in a racist culture and therefore his racism, and indeed that of baseball, should not be used to condemn either Landis or baseball. This is a dubious proposition on several counts.

From what Macht tells us, and from several other sources, including Landis’s major biographer, David Pietrusza, it is clear that Commissioner Landis was a bulwark against change. His denials of any rule or ban



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*Larry MacPhail, president of the Dodgers (1938–42), and his successor Branch Rickey. General manager of the Yankees when Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, MacPhail has been described as ambivalent or outright opposed to the move, a stance that may have led to Rickey’s distancing himself from MacPhail shortly thereafter.*

on African Americans in baseball was a convenient way of saying, I can do nothing to change things because there is nothing to change. At the same time Landis denied there was what Larry MacPhail called “an unwritten law tantamount to an agreement between major league clubs on the subject of the racial issue.”<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that the hypocrisy of Landis’s public posture is clear and that for whatever reason Landis was ducking the issue.

When desegregation did come, the existence of such an agreement became clear, as MacPhail and the other owners mounted considerable resistance to Branch Rickey’s signing of Jackie Robinson. This is well documented by Jules Tygiel, Lee Lowenfish, and others.<sup>2</sup> The slow pace of desegregation is also a clear indication of resistance among the owners.

As the leader of a major public institution, Organized Baseball, Judge Landis resisted attempts to move

that institution to desegregate. One can argue that he was simply a man of his times and therefore his behavior is understandable. One can also argue that those who defended institutional racism at any level, which meant a vast majority of white Americans, were part of the problem.

One thing we know about Landis is that in both his judicial career and his time as commissioner he was a staunch defender of the status quo. We also know that he was a man who saw himself in tune with the will of the populace. In both roles he played to the public, relished public adulation, and loved the spotlight. For Landis to have moved to desegregate baseball would have been an action out of character.

In a changing world in which the forces attacking segregation were beginning to move forward, Judge Landis failed the test of leadership and hid behind dissembling rhetoric. He was indeed a man of his times, not a leader of them.

As for baseball, does it deserve this black eye? Did it resist social change and social justice? Did it do so while describing itself as the game of democracy, the national pastime, and the American game? Did it see itself as a vehicle for teaching democracy to American immigrants? Did it see itself as a vehicle for spreading democracy and civilization around the world? Did it see itself as democratic because it conducted its business under the rules of fair play and equal opportunity, proclaiming its purity as a meritocracy?

If you can answer all these questions in the affirmative, and I am certain from my own work that you can,<sup>3</sup> then Norman Macht's primary question can only be answered in the affirmative. Baseball deserves this back eye.

As for Landis, was he a racist? No more so than his contemporaries. He was the commissioner of baseball who defended the institutional racism within Organized Baseball, and he failed to seek any alteration of the status quo. In this he shared a responsibility with many. As Tygiel notes, Landis did not "single-handedly perpetuate baseball segregation."<sup>4</sup> As Pietrusza points out there were no owners pressing Landis to support their desire for change, and there was no rush to desegregate after Landis's death.<sup>5</sup>

The question about Landis should not be whether he was racist but whether, as commissioner of baseball, he provided leadership for justice and equality. ■

## Notes

1. David Pietrusza, *Judge and Jury: The Life and Times of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis* (South Bend, Ind.: Diamond Communications, 1998), 419.
2. Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), passim; Lee Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), passim.
3. Richard Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), chap. 2.
4. Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment*, 32.
5. Pietrusza, *Judge and Jury*, 427.

# The Gentlemen's Agreement and the Ferocious Gentleman Who Broke It

Lee Lowenfish

I DOUBT that any thoughtful person would disagree with Norman Macht's contention that "what we know about the past is laced with uncertainty." Another way of making the point comes in the opening epigraph to L. P. Hartley's 1953 novel, later a film, *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." Though it is true that it is almost impossible to ever fully light the dim, dark abyss that is the past, those of us who want to wear the mantle of historian successfully must engage in acts of historical imagination and make at least educated guesses. So it seems to me particularly unsatisfying that Norman Macht defends Commissioner Landis's racial policies because "most of us weren't there as witnesses 65 or 70 years ago, when America was a very different place." By that line of argument we might conclude that only someone who was a contemporary of Landis could appraise his administration, and I cannot believe Macht supports that conclusion. Though I also question Macht's contention that the United States of the Landis years was "a very different place" from the country of today (despite the election of the first African American president and a greater acceptance of the diversity of our population), the main contention of his I want to address is that Landis and baseball have gotten an undeserved black eye for not pushing earlier for racial integration.

Because of its unique historic place in American society, baseball has always had to live up to a higher standard than have the other sports, and therefore its failure to act on the American creed of equality has made it vulnerable to charges of hypocrisy. Macht argues that because "America was a racist society in the first half of the twentieth century" you cannot blame Commissioner Landis for not taking the lead on integrating the sport. As an individual Kenesaw Mountain Landis may not have been more conservative on the race issue than the owners he ruled over, but he had the power to lead on it, and he did not choose to employ that power. As the "czar" appointed to clean up the mess left by the Black Sox scandal, Landis had enormous powers, which he used to ban the alleged fixers of the World Series, even though a Chicago jury had ruled them innocent. Though Macht is correct that Landis could not destroy the farm system that Branch

Rickey had ingeniously invented to enable his small-market St. Louis Cardinals to compete with the big-pocketed big-city owners, the commissioner did free dozens of minor leaguers from Rickey's and other clubs' systems. Though I agree that it is poor historical judgment to expect Landis to have had the racially progressive vision of, let us say, today's pro football, which mandates minority interviewing for front-office positions through the Rooney Rule (named after the owner of one of their most racially progressive franchises, the Pittsburgh Steelers), it is nonetheless true that Landis could have taken more positive steps to push for racial integration. The evidence is clear that Landis did not want to take a leadership role on this issue.

Macht cites Landis's public statement in the summer of 1942 that baseball has no rule that bars players of color from being signed. He does not mention that the commissioner was reacting to the pressure of what *New York Daily News* sportswriter Hy Turkin described as being "assailed by more than a million letters, telegrams and phone calls" that landed on his desk calling for integration, a grassroots movement organized by American communist activists but obviously not limited to their backers. According to Larry Lester in an important if rhetorically overheated article in the fall 2008 issue of the new journal *Black Ball* (McFarland Press), both the Pittsburgh Pirates and the Cleveland Indians promised in 1942 to give tryouts to several Negro League players, but both franchises got cold feet and certainly were not encouraged by the commissioner to proceed.

One of the problems in producing evidence about a conspiracy of silence is that there is rarely a smoking gun to prove complicity. (In *Soul of the Game*, the HBO fictionalized 1995 movie about Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, and Jackie Robinson, an unintended hilarious misreading of the baseball color line came when there appeared on the screen the headline "Landis Bars Negroes.") It is interesting, though, that Macht himself quotes Dodgers general manager Larry MacPhail admitting, at the very same time that Landis was denying, that there was indeed a gentlemen's agreement against signing players of color. Responding to the pressure of the especially active sports-minded communists in Brooklyn, MacPhail in 1942 told their paper the *Daily Worker* that if the Dodgers won the



*Appointed commissioner in the wake of the Black Sox scandal, Landis was granted powers that he used to ban the alleged fixers of the 1919 World Series and later to weaken the farm system invented by Rickey. That Landis did not use the power of his office to push for integration is held against him by many baseball historians.*

World Series they might play the winners of the Negro League pennant in a postseason tournament. The offer became moot when the Dodgers fell two games short of the National League pennant and MacPhail resigned from his position to reenter the military. One wonders, though, how sincere MacPhail's offer was, given his adamant opposition to integration three years later, once Branch Rickey had beaten every team to the punch by signing Jackie Robinson. When MacPhail returned as president of the Yankees in 1946, he spearheaded the secret report that warned of dangers to the "physical properties of franchises" if Robinson integrated the Dodgers—that is, too many black fans might chase away more-prosperous white fans. It also seems highly unlikely that Landis would have approved MacPhail's suggestion of a postseason series against the Negro League champs, given that Landis had long discouraged white players from competing in such off-season exhibitions.

It required a practical visionary like Branch Rickey to make integration work, and, despite all the criticisms of his bombastic style leveled by his contemporaries and by later historians, the substance of his program and its example for other efforts at desegregation remains a stirringly successful saga. I have never been a big fan of "What Would Have Happened If" history, and Norman Macht's foray into the genre is not convincing when he suggests that if Sam Breadon had rehired Rickey in St. Louis there never would have been a Jackie Robinson signing in Brooklyn. With the Negro League player market ripe for mining, Rickey, I think, would have found a way to tap it, if not in St. Louis then in another city.

Speculative "If" history might be useful regarding what might have happened if Landis had lived through the end of World War II and was faced with the fait accompli of the Robinson signing. My educated guess (and it can be only a guess, of course) is that Landis

would not have made any major objection. Once New York State passed the antidiscriminatory Ives-Quinn Law during spring training 1945 and Rickey exclaimed to his wife at the breakfast table, "They can't stop me now!" there was little Landis could have done, especially with a federal Fair Employment Practices Commission statute already on the books.

Macht is correct that Branch Rickey shared the fears of all the baseball owners about what might happen "if a black player got into a fight on the field or argued with an umpire—who knew what might spark a riot in the bleachers?" But it did not stop him from going on with his grand plan to add talented African American prospects to the products of his latest burgeoning farm system in Brooklyn. Rickey's fear of black overreaction, though, explains why he took such pains to stress to Jackie Robinson that he must be a symbol of probity and modesty in his role as racial pioneer. Later historians and black activists have been critical of Rickey's cautious handling of the issue and Robinson's buying into the program, yet there should be no trimming of the historical record to dilute praise for Rickey's leadership on the issue.

What is incontrovertibly true is that Rickey shrewdly planned for the racial revolution, trying to defuse the opposition from both whites and blacks by "attacking prejudice on its blind side," as he would put it in a remarkable series of interviews on Pittsburgh public television in 1959, during which he also pithily defined prejudice as "strong opinion without cause." He understood that the legacy of racism was deep among owners and players alike, and therefore he sought a pioneer whose ability on the field was so outstanding and his demeanor off of it so impeccable that he could not be resisted by both those who wanted a winning team and those who wanted to do the right thing after a million African Americans had served their country in World War II.

To me, then, the issue is not the black eye that Landis allegedly has received but rather the garland that baseball deserves for setting the standard, however reluctantly, for the integration of American society that was to begin, however haltingly, in the years ahead. In this area I wholly endorse Norman Macht's conclusion that baseball "deserves recognition for leading—dragging—the rest of America a little closer to the ultimate goal of equality of opportunity." ■

# Response by Norman Macht

THE PRIMARY purpose of my paper was to try to root out the baseless myth embedded in the minds of many SABR members that Judge Landis blocked major-league club owners from signing black players. It may be axiomatic that the past cannot be judged by the standards and mores of the present, but there are people in SABR who still do it.

I appreciate the support for my position expressed by Richard Crepeau and Lee Lowenfish. Nothing they have written disproves my thesis. Much they have written, such as the quotes from Tygiel and Pietrusza cited by Crepeau, backs it. Lowenfish points out the fiction of the “Landis Bars Negroes” headline in an HBO movie.

Crepeau blames Landis for failing to exercise leadership in the cause of integration. But not leading a cause is not the same as blocking it. He characterizes Landis as “a man who saw himself in tune with the will of the populace,” playing to the public. This implies that for “Landis to have moved to integrate baseball” would have been out of tune with the will of the populace, which is what I was trying to say. It follows that, if the public was truly demanding integration, and Landis played to the public, he would have been promoting it.

Crepeau calls it “ludicrous” to think that the customers’ attitudes might affect club owners’ decisions in putting their product—their teams—before the public. But everything from rowdyism to gambling and the Black Sox affair was viewed by baseball moguls as to how it would affect attendance.

Crepeau accuses Landis of ducking the issue (which, again, is not the same as “barring Negroes”). But black sportswriters didn’t see it that way when he made his 1942 statement. The *Baltimore Afro-American* of July 25, 1942, ran the headline “Landis Clears Way for

Owners to Hire Colored.” Sports editor Art Carter said Landis made it clear that it was up to any owner “willing to blaze the trail in breaking down the bar against colored players.”

My two respondents disagree on my second contention: that baseball deserves recognition for leading the way in integration, not castigation for taking so long. Lowenfish agrees; Crepeau cries foul.

Both cite the Fair Employment Practices Order of 1941, which is irrelevant, since it covered only the defense industry and did nothing for blacks trying to drive streetcars in Philadelphia and Washington, or work with white firemen, or clerk in downtown department stores.

Lowenfish believes that baseball has always had to live up to a higher standard than do other sports. But I don’t think this was ever true. (For a long time there were no other professional team sports.) Standards weren’t all that high in the nineteenth century. Gambling and game-fixing went on long before 1919. Club owners’ subterfuges, syndicate ownerships, and rules violations were common practices. A higher standard? Though baseball fans wish it were true, the current steroids mess is further proof that it still ain’t so.

Crepeau condemns “baseball” for how he says it saw itself—as an engine for democracy and justice and civilization, while remaining all-white. I think that’s a stretch. Baseball owners saw it as a bottom-line business first and last, notwithstanding the hypocritical use of pompous flag-waving and self-serving oratory by some tycoons and politicians.

The record is clear that baseball was far ahead of the rest of the country in the area of integration, and Lee Lowenfish is right to credit Branch Rickey with leading the way. ■

At SABR's 2006 convention one speaker analyzed the commissioners of baseball and rated Judge Landis the best of all. In the question-and-answer session that followed, a member of the audience challenged the speaker: "How can you stand here in the year 2006 and praise Landis, who was so instrumental in keeping blacks out of Major League Baseball?" Had I been the presenter, I would have replied, "How do you *know* that Landis was so instrumental in barring blacks?" . . .

What we think we know about the past is laced with uncertainty. There's very little we can be sure about. We must be open to challenging what we think we know when we come across contrary evidence, or across something that doesn't quite fit. That's not easy.

— Norman L. Macht, "Does Baseball Deserve This Black Eye?"

One thing we know about Landis is that in both his judicial career and his time as commissioner he was a staunch defender of the status quo. We also know that he was a man who saw himself in tune with the will of the populace. In both roles he played to the public, relished public adulation, and loved the spotlight. For Landis to have moved to desegregate baseball would have been an action out of character.

In a changing world in which the forces attacking segregation were beginning to move forward, Judge Landis failed the test of leadership and hid behind dissembling rhetoric. He was indeed a man of his times, not a leader of them.

— Richard Crepeau, "Landis, Baseball, and Racism"



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