



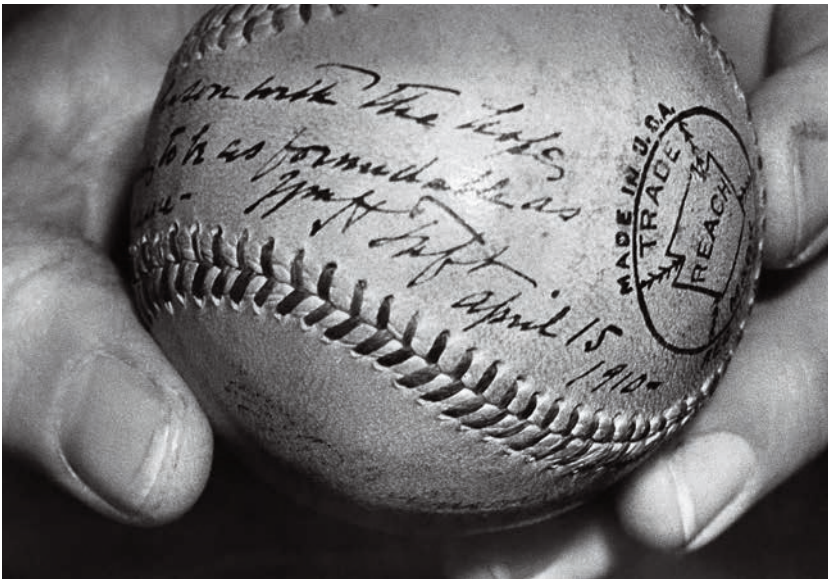
Pitching Politics

Former presidential speechwriter Curt Smith documents the twinned histories of baseball and the presidency.

By Kathleen McGarvey

BASEBALL BOOSTER: Franklin Roosevelt—
pictured here in 1937, alongside manager
and owner Connie Mack—threw out the first
ball every year except one between 1933 and
1941. He relished trips to the ballpark and saw
the game as critical to keeping up troop and
civilian morale during World War II.





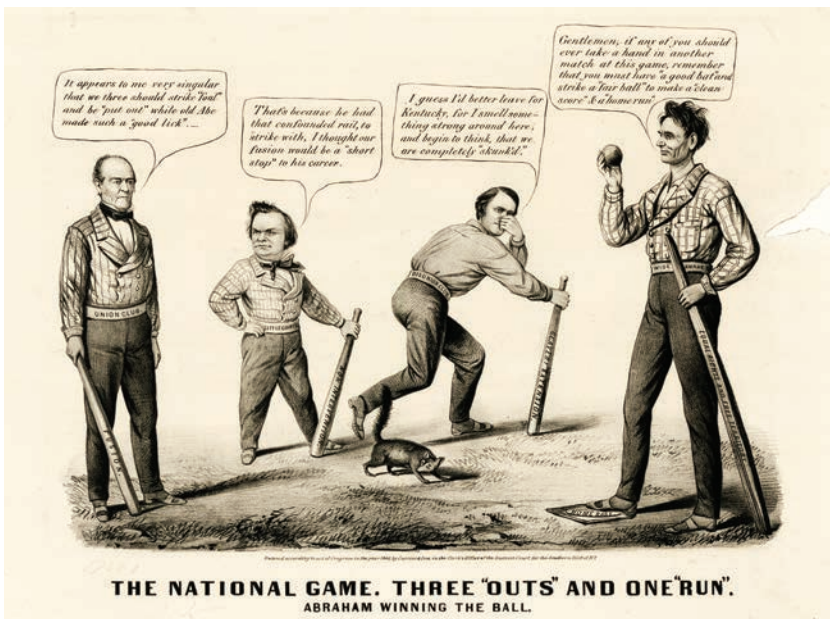
PERFECT PITCH: Former Washington Senators pitcher Walter Johnson in 1937 holds the first ball ever pitched by a president—William Taft, in 1910—to open a major league game.

George Washington was known to throw a ball—for hours, reported one soldier under his command—with his aide-de-camp during the Revolutionary War. Abraham Lincoln would join baseball games on the lawn of Blair House, which still stands across Pennsylvania Avenue from the White House. “I remember how vividly he ran, how long were his strides, how far his coattails stuck out behind,” the home’s owner, Francis Preston Blair, recalled in a letter to his grandson.

The story of baseball in the United States is intertwined with that of the presidency, says Curt Smith, a senior lecturer in English and the author of *The Presidents and the Pastime: The History of Baseball and the White House* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018). He traces the points of connection from the colonial era to the present, devoting a chapter to each president since William Howard Taft, who in 1910 inaugurated the practice of the president throwing out a ceremonial first pitch.

Growing up in small-town Caledonia, New York, Smith would sit on his front porch, poring over the presidential biographies and baseball entries in the family’s encyclopedia set. “I was enamored,” he says. “Fixated.”

He followed his entrancements to their ends, becoming a speechwriter to President George H. W. Bush and the person *USA Today* once dubbed the “voice of authority on baseball broadcasting.”





BIPARTISAN EFFORT: Dwight Eisenhower (above) throws out a ball to open the American League baseball season in April 1960. In 1961, John F. Kennedy (left) tosses the season's first pitch at Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. Home park for the Senators, it boasted a presidential box in its stands.

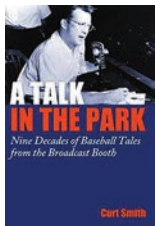


GRAND OLD GAME: A contemporary political cartoon (far left) depicts Abraham Lincoln winning the "national game" by defeating his three opponents in the 1860 presidential election. Lincoln played informal ballgames before and after becoming president. Richard Nixon (above) prepares to pitch at the Washington Senators' opening game in 1969.

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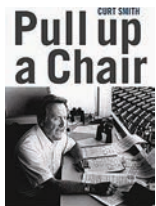
Around the Horn

A newspaper columnist, former National Public Radio affiliate series host and presidential speechwriter, and one-time *Saturday Evening Post* senior editor, Curt Smith has written 17 books, including a range of publications on baseball and on the presidency. Here are a few of his “hits.”



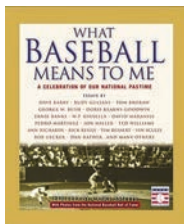
A Talk in the Park: Nine Decades of Baseball Tales from the Broadcast Booth (Potomac Books, 2011) An oral history of baseball announcers, whose ability to entertain and report can forge an almost

familial bond with listeners. The book brings together the voices of 116 baseball commentators to discuss players, ballparks, teams, and other aspects of the game.



Pull up a Chair: The Vin Scully Story (Potomac Books, 2010) The first biography of one of the sport's most famous broadcasters, the book takes its title from Scully's famed on-air greeting.

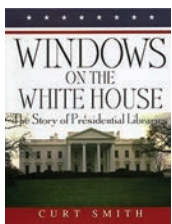
Smith published the book when the Dodgers' announcer marked his 60th year of play-by-play broadcasting.



What Baseball Means to Me: A Celebration of Our National Pastime (Warner Books, 2002)

For this official publication of the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum,

Smith rounded up 172 essayists—including presidents, actors, athletes, and writers—to reminisce about baseball. Their memories are augmented by more than 200 photographs.



Windows on the White House: The Story of Presidential Libraries (Diamond Communications, 2001) Smith

examines the origins and purposes of presidential libraries, beginning with

the first such institution, Rutherford B. Hayes's library, which opened in Fremont, Ohio, in 1916.

—Kathleen McGarvey



HOME TEAM: Longtime Chicago White Sox fan Barack Obama delivers the first pitch of the Washington Nationals' home opening baseball game, against the Philadelphia Phillies, in 2010.

Many politicians have been baseball fans, and Smith seized opportunities to talk about the game with people such as President Richard Nixon and New York Governor Mario Cuomo, once widely viewed as a likely future president.

Nixon was uncoordinated and not much of an athlete, but he had “an endearing ‘Walter Mitty’ quality to him regarding baseball, which is true of many people,” Smith says. Cuomo, by contrast, was a former center fielder in the Pittsburgh Pirates farm system. But each of them saw strong links between politics and baseball.

Both pursuits are combative, Smith says they told him. “They require strategy and the use of all your resources—mental, physical, and often moral and spiritual. And neither pursuit is bereft of ego.”

While the high stakes of the presidency are self-evident, for millions of Americans—Smith included—the rewards and perils of the playing field are deeply felt, too.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt, asking whether the 1942 baseball season should go ahead as planned. Roosevelt gave his reply publicly, at a press conference: “I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going.”

The president had concluded that the game was crucial to morale, both for troops abroad and on the home front. Smith writes: “Baseball’s cachet was so overwhelming that FDR did not consider obliging another sport . . . The priority here was the war, which baseball could help win.”

The game’s fortunes have since declined. In the 1960s, television networks broadcast five regular-season match-ups per week. Now the only people who watch “already love baseball. It doesn’t court casual fans,” Smith says. This “freefall” in popularity pains him, and he has pointed suggestions for baseball’s leaders on measures that he thinks would draw more people to the sport, including keeping the batter in the batter’s box, enforcing the strike zone, and eliminating pitchers’ delays.

But the pleasure of what he calls “this evocative sport” isn’t in the technicalities, and the book weaves together political and athletic anecdotes. “There are a lot of statistics included, because baseball has a lot of statistics,” he says. “But I hate the whole mania for analytics. I love stories.”

So do many politicians—and baseball’s legendary broadcasters. “It’s known as the greatest talking game,” says Smith. “You tell stories between pitches. Between innings. Between batters. Between games in a series.”

One of his own favorite stories is about the first President Bush. The captain of his college team and a tireless spectator, he told Smith he loved the game from the first time he picked up a bat, at age five.

“Baseball,” Bush said, “has everything.” **R**

SPORTS HISTORY: Babe Ruth presents to Yale baseball captain and future president George H. W. Bush the original manuscript of *The Babe Ruth Story* in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1948. The manuscript was placed in the Yale University Library.

