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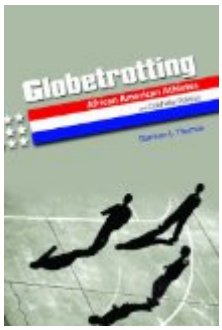

Damion L. Thomas. *Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. x + 209 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03717-7.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The list of elements of American culture that unite folks rich and poor, black and white, male and female, is short. Antebellum Americans could commiserate over their mutual ambitions, their family roots across the Atlantic, the omnipresent reality of agriculture in their daily lives, or perhaps the frustrations of raising children. By the post-World War II era, farming had been whittled off the list of common ground conversation points for many Americans, and music, food, and sports were ascending in popular thought. Food was a centerpiece of daily life: there were family dinners around the table; holiday celebrations; cherished recipes; advertisements embellishing the strengths and weaknesses of this new product or that; as well as the growing number of restaurants popping up across suburbia. Music was the zest that reflected some moods and created others, exacerbating rifts between generations with each passing decade, but still offering a wellspring of discussion about the merits of jazz or blues, the mop-headed quartet from Liverpool, or why it was (or was not) necessary to swivel and gyrate one's hips when singing along with that Presley boy.

But neither food nor music took on the national and international significance of sporting culture as the Cold War and civil rights movement shared the front pages of newspapers, and dominated the conversations at barber shops, post office counters, church services, and water coolers across America. Sports grew in power and meaning across America for many reasons: radio and later television brought content into living rooms; teams and heroic players became sources of identity for fans; the market economy turned sport into a consumable product; and, American conceptualizations of rugged masculinity have always been rife with physical expressions. As sport collectively gathered cultural momentum--ultimately taking on the symbolic trappings of religion for some--it became evident to many that athletes and athletics could be used to sell more than just tickets, popcorn, and t-shirts.

Foremost among the users of sport's growing cultural power, Damion Thomas argues, was the U.S. government. Cold War politics demanded proactive and reactive strategies to contest both physical places and intellectual spaces lest they fall prey to Soviet influences. Freedom and liberty, equality and opportunity, were easily sold around the world as stock commodities of Americanism. Yet America's racial realities were fertile ground for Soviet responses. "The unpunished lynching of African-Americans, segregated schooling, and rampant obstruction of black voting rights," Thomas writes, "were increasingly becoming problematic for American efforts to assume a leading role in world affairs after the onset of the Cold War" (p. 4). In short, America sold the progressive Jackie Robinson story--athletic-based integration and success of racial minorities--even as the Soviets sought to remind the international community of Emmit Till. In the face of international criticism of segregation, exclusion, disfranchisement, and lynching, America pointed to black progress, often in the form of individual achievements of black athletes. Clearly, Thomas argues, the government's use of sport to soften the international assessment of American racial discrimination was "deceptive" and "manipulative" (p. 3).

If selling stories of black athletic achievement as a way to demonstrate the American Dream was one thing, showing the central characters up close was thought to be even better. And the preferred method was using the State Department to organize tours of American athletes abroad. Thomas identifies any number of clinics, exhibitions, competitions, and other events designed to export "emotionally charged ritual demonstrations involving symbolism" to other countries whose political or economic stability might be swayed by communism. "The goal," Thomas argues, "was to influence the current and future leaders and decision makers of foreign nations" (p. 101).

Among the many groups traveling overseas to put on a good show were the (often) red, white, and blue bedecked Harlem Globetrotters. Integrating trickster traditions, clowning, and fundamental basketball, the Globetrotters entertained audiences even as they almost always defeated their opponents. The Globetrotter players fancied the tours as a chance to prove they were excellent basketball players, not just slapstick physical comedians, and worthy of comparison to great international teams or the mostly white NBA players whom they occasionally beat in stateside competitions. But their flair and showmanship--Thomas calls their style of play "minstrel-inspired"--sent a mixed message. With Europe not ready to replace its colonial activities with an embrace of an independent Africa, "the globetrotters fitted into preestablished racist notions that suggested that people of African descent did not have the capacity for self-government" (p. 74).

In the best chapter of the book, Thomas builds on the themes anticipated by the Globetrotter tours to argue for an American sports diplomacy concept backed by the idea of the "Good Negro." Situated in the context of the turbulent racial times of the Eisenhower and Kennedy presidential eras, "good negroes"--clean cut, articulate, successful, patriotic black athletes--became countermeasures employed to boost the image of America. For all the talk of Iron Curtains and duck-and-cover drills, much of the most contested terrain in the Cold War was in lesser developed or Third World nations. Bill Russell's dominating University of San Francisco Dons basketball squad was sent on a goodwill tour across Latin America, building "great quantities of friends for the United States," according to one State Department official and creating impressions "worth more than hundreds of thousands of printed words" according to another (pp. 104-105).

Thomas's argument about these "Good Negro" goodwill tours is that they were ultimately unsuccessful in altering certain perceptions foreign na-

tions held about racial repression in the United States. In part, the massive expansion of television not only brought civil rights movement images into American living rooms, it created an electronic environment where American sins became fodder for international disapproval. The violence and tumult at Little Rock led to the creation of a State Department report, "Treatment of Minorities in the United States--Impact on Our Foreign Relations, " which concluded that "high profile incidents of racial strife and struggle ... overshadowed reports of progress" (p. 121). Internationally, so many nations expressed concern and outrage over the violence unleashed by southern segregationists that a poll conducted in the early 1960s indicated that 78 percent of Americans thought racial strife was plaguing foreign affairs. "Racism," U.S. Information Agency deputy director Donald Wilson argued in a 1963 speech, "puts our professions of freedom and democracy in doubt; it more than any other, makes suspect our motives and aspirations" (p. 126).

Compounding the use of sports for cultural and ideological reasons was the fact that the Soviet Union was becoming increasingly successful in international sports competitions and engaging in some goodwill touring of its own. Explaining away Soviet competitive successes with tortured narratives about the differences between state-sponsored communist professional athletes and private enterprise-backed capitalist amateurs only worked to a point. Both governments, American and Soviet, crowed that their victories--particularly in direct competition against each other--were indications of the superiority of their respective systems. As a result, international rivalries extended two ways: from the court and track and pool into the Kremlin and White House, and vice versa. As the power of sport continued to grow in American culture, it became the nationalistic norm to cheer for the American in televised competitions, jeer the communist athletes, and keep loose count of the total medal standings. Both nations boycotted Olympic competitions; both accused the other of cheating; both worked to persuade allies to adopt similar beliefs about Cold War sport; and both capitalized on the cultural power of sport for any number of domestic and political reasons.

Thomas closes his work with a thoughtful chapter on role reversal: black athletes seizing the initiative to make some cultural arguments of their own. By the late 1960s and particularly at the 1968 Summer Olympics, some black athletes pushed back against the "Good Negro" concept in favor of a more defiant set of symbols. The raised, gloved fists of John Carlos and Tommy Smith on the medal stand became iconic images, and unleashed years of discussion about what is means to be black, to be American, to be an athlete, and to be all three. Sport remained a weapon of sorts, but a new kind of cudgel that was increasingly likely to be wielded by individual athletes or groups of athletes, not just governments, and often for their own economic empowerment. Thomas does not assess black athletes within the context of sporting labor issues, a matter with clear lines tracing back to ideas about economic systems and, therefore, in some form or fashion, the ideological nature of the Cold War. Nor does the author assess another outcome of the civil rights movement which altered the sporting landscape of the nation: the end of segregation, which brought a slew of professional franchises to the South and a new counterweight to Soviet charges of persistent American human rights violations.

Thomas relies on a variety of sources: newspapers, correspondence, government reports and press releases, monographs, and a select number of biographies. Soviet or communist bloc sources are in short supply, but a greater inclusion of them would not necessarily have done much to change Thomas's arguments. The work has plenty of applications for undergraduate courses, and general readers who have an interest in the Cold War, the civil rights movement, or athletics will find the book within their reach. A post-Cold War

concluding chapter would have been more useful than the epilogue, but that is but a minor quibble.

Globetrotting: African American Athletes and Cold War Politics argues that the U.S. government willingly used black athletes to create certain positive images in a high-stakes international game of chess. That sport could be used for manipulative purposes should not be surprising. Nearly 110 million people watched the most recent Super Bowl: some to see the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers battle on the gridiron, some to watch the avalanche of commercials, and some just to be able to join in the conversations that filled up the next week or so of their lives. With international events like the World Cup, Tour de France, and Olympic Games continuing to have great cultural significance around the globe, it is a sure bet that sports will only continue to be a source of political intrigue.