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**A Flag is Flipped and a Nation Flaps: The Politics and Patriotism of the First
International World Series**

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ABSTRACT

The "World Series" title has often been scrutinized as being a flagrant misnomer for Major League Baseball's best-of-seven championship event. While there is a long history of non-U.S. born athletes competing in the series, prior to 1992 the teams had always represented and played in U.S. cities. The World Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Toronto Blue Jays marked the first time an international city, albeit from the same continent, was featured in the Fall Classic. Here, the author revisits this historic series and the drama that ensued on both sides of the border as a result of its unique "international" flare.

KEYWORDS:

Major League Baseball; World Series; Toronto Blue Jays; Atlanta Braves; Canada; Sports

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A Flag is Flipped and a Nation Flaps: The Politics and Patriotism of the First International World Series

The "World Series" title has often been scrutinized as being a flagrant misnomer for Major League Baseball's best-of-seven championship event. While there is a long history of non-U.S. born athletes competing in the series, prior to 1992 the teams had always represented and played in U.S. cities. The World Series between the Atlanta Braves and the Toronto Blue Jays marked the first time an international city, albeit from the same continent, was featured in the Fall Classic. A decade prior, the Toronto expansion team had just come off a six-year stretch of consecutive last place finishes in their division.¹ In 1992, however, the Jays were scorching hot, and Canada had officially contracted baseball fever. More accurately perhaps, Blue Jays fever. An article published in Canada's *Macleans*'s newsmagazine described it well. It explained how the Jays "carried the hopes of Canada into the premier event of America's national pastime. In a three-way compact, the players, the city, and the country all sought a World Series victory – *now*."²

With Toronto being home to one of only two Major League Baseball franchises in all of Canada (the Montreal Expos being the other), Canadian baseball fans had slim pickings unless they decided to root for a team from the States, an option many did and still do take today. The success of the '92 Blue Jays, however, had captivated the nation from East to West.³ After all, this team was stacked with the likes of Joe Carter, Roberto Alomar, John Olerud, and the soon-to-be World Series MVP, Pat "North of the" Borders. The pitching staff had equal depth provided by starters Jack Morris, David Wells, Pat

Hentgen, Juan Guzman, as well as set-up man Mark Eichhorn and the ever-solid closer Tom “The Terminator” Henke. Although not a single member of the Blue Jays’ roster was Canadian, “the twenty-five U.S.- and Latin American-born players were understood to represent Canada as surely as twenty-five Canadians could have done.”⁴

After beating their rival Oakland Athletics in an intense 6-game struggle for the American League pennant, the Blue Jays, backed by an entire nation were in position to make baseball history and receive due recognition on professional baseball's biggest stage. The Blue Jays' designated hitter and “41-year-old elder statesman” Dave Winfield may have said it best: “We're aware that we don't represent just a city. We represent an entire country. Every team has its territory, of course, maybe a state or region, but we've got all of Canada.”⁵ The media on both sides of the border had a great time propping up the international component of the series. In the U.S. the clamor was all about baseball being “our game,” and to the Canadians it was a matter of sending their Trojan Horse stateside to shake-up America’s game.⁶ On the day the Jays arrived in Atlanta, a local writer described it like this: “The Canadians are riding across the border trying to wrest away the Holy Grail of American sport and cart *our game* off to the frozen North.”⁷ The message was clear and, regardless of the outcome, the 89th World Series was predestined to be something special.

While it is beyond the scope or intent of this essay (not to mention the expertise of this author) to delve into a comprehensive analysis of the political and social landscape of Canada during the early nineties, for the sake of providing context it is worthy to note that this swell of national pride happened to coincide with a very

interesting crossroads in contemporary Canadian history. A national referendum was scheduled for Monday, October 26, just days after the series concluded, asking Canadians to vote "Yes/Oui" or "No/Non" on a package of proposed constitutional amendments. The "Charlottetown Accord," as it was called, contained new legislation pertaining to the balance of federal and provincial powers and several other issues of long-standing importance to Canadians. Among the most significant and polarizing issues at stake in the referendum were those dealing with the unique status of Quebec, Senate reform, and the rights and political representation of Native peoples. A win by the "Yes" vote would have legally characterized Quebec as a "distinct society" within the country, abolished the nonelected Senate and replaced it with an elected body, and granted Native populations their "inherent" right to self-government, thus creating three levels of government: federal, provincial, and Native. If there was ever such a thing as riveting Canadian political affairs, this was it.

Prime Minister Brian Mulroney tried harnessing the energy provided by the Blue Jays' ascent to the World Series toward bolstering support for his party's position on the vote. It was suggested that "a Blue Jays victory could lead to warm and fuzzy feelings of patriotism and national unity, thus assuring a win for the YES side of the referendum, the Prime Minister's side."⁸ When addressing the team directly, Mulroney told the players: "You have a united nation behind you, capturing the imagination of Canadians from Coast to Coast."⁹ By and large, he was right about that, but as he eventually found out, this broad support of the Blue Jays was non-transferable to support of his political agenda. While the media and the majority of Canadian politicians, including all ten

provincial Premiers, supported the accord, the “No/Non” supporters defeated the proposed measures (54.5% with over 70% of eligible voters participating). Of the provinces, only New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island gave strong support for the referendum. Ontario, home to the Blue Jays, was the only large province that voted in its favor and this was by a very slim margin of less than one percent. Quebec (whose sovereigntists were resolute in their belief that the “unique status” provision was not enough) along with the large central and western provinces, all voted soundly against it.¹⁰ One reporter accurately stated that the excitement surrounding the Blue Jays had upstaged this political clash “at its penultimate moment.”¹¹

Now back to baseball.

Game 1 of the World Series in Atlanta went off without a hitch. Much to the delight of Ted Turner and wife Jane Fonda who watched the game live from the owner’s box, the home team, the “American” team, took the win. Atlanta’s Tom Glavin pitched a four-hitter, and Damon Berryhill’s three-run homer gave the Braves the 3-1 victory. It seemed as though the series was off to a “normal” start, and the whole deal about a Canadian team making it to the Big Show was just a side note to the action on the field. However, a most peculiar turn of events in this historic series came during the opening proceedings of game 2 and it was being held in the hands of a U.S. Marine color guard – the Canadian Flag, upside-down. A minor detail, maybe, but this one certainly added extra spice to this already uniquely flavored Fall Classic. It was the evening of October 18th, 1992. With 51,765 fans in attendance, *O Canada* was being sung by Canadian

singer/songwriter Tom Cochrane, and the iconic, should-be-upright maple leaf of the Canadian Flag was pointing at the ground as if it were hanging limp from the branch of a tree.¹² Wayne Long, the Braves' vice president of marketing, recalled the moment: "It was windy out there, and the flag was all furled up because we didn't want it flapping around. When we saw it unfurl, we all took a deep breath and said, 'Oh, no.' "¹³

Perhaps this particular orientation of the leaf seemed only natural to the one responsible for preparing the flag, but such an explanation was not going to fly with the millions of Canadians staring at their television sets that evening, jaws dropped and eyes rolling in disbelief. In fact, according to one baseball official, immediately after the flag appeared on the screen, "the switchboard at the Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium immediately lit up with calls of protest."¹⁴ Canadian viewers were also quick to call in protest to television and radio stations, newspapers, and government offices.

Apparently the flag was not even shown on American television, thus generating much less of an immediate reaction stateside. However, eyewitnesses did take notice, and by the middle of the second inning, Major League Baseball had issued a formal apology to the people of Canada and to all baseball fans for the "improper presentation of the flag."¹⁵

Despite its not being televised in the U.S., this unfortunate flag incident did manage to work its way into the next day's newspaper coverage and American televised news. North of the border, on the other hand, it was nothing short of front-page, headline news, and pure sacrilege. *The Toronto Sun* wrote, "Sunday's flag gaffe speaks to the appalling ignorance many Americans suffer from whenever it comes to dealing

with any country other than their own.”¹⁶ Another writer took a personal jab at the city of Atlanta itself, the future home to the 1996 Summer Olympics.¹⁷ If “nobody in charge noticed that the Canadian flag was upside down,” he asked, “what can Kenyans or Albanians expect four years hence?”¹⁸ Even the *Daily Mail* in London chimed in on the topic, wondering “what manner of tangled webs are those fine southern gentlemen from the Deep South going to spin with 200 or so foreign flags of the Olympic movement in 1996?”¹⁹ In Canada, the flag flip was on everyone’s mind to the point that Toronto’s THEFAN radio station had to announce to its listeners, “No flag calls. Talk baseball.”²⁰ Stateside, some dubbed this entire hullabaloo as being somewhat contrived and chalked it up to insecurity and over-sensitivity on the part of the Canadian fans. A perfect example of this was the rather presumptuous next-day headline in *The Rocky Mountain News* out of Denver that read, “CANADIANS’ PRIDE EASILY WOUNDED.” Similarly, a writer for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* asked, “And can you believe in the year 1992, with all the other issues we have on the planet Earth, there will be such a ruckus over something as trivial as this?”²¹ Belittling the incident only added fuel to the fire, creating a colorful rivalry between cities that had nary a thing to do with baseball. A columnist for *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto responded sarcastically to the assertions made in the American headlines, writing that “only little, timid, insecure countries get their shorts in a knot about having their flag hung upside down in front of a few million people by accident.”²² Fortunately, President George Bush Sr. knew there was more to it than this. During an interview in Atlanta, President Bush validated the Canadian reaction by acknowledging that if “the American flag had been displayed

upside down in Toronto, the American people would have been very, very upset."²³ "So on behalf of all Americans," he continued, "I simply wanted to apologize to the people of Canada and suggest we try to keep this from now on out of the marvelous baseball rivalry between Atlanta and Toronto."²⁴ Canadians appreciated the presidential apology and were amazed to see the international attention this upsetting incident had attracted. One Toronto reporter called it "the greatest mass acknowledgment of Canada's existence by Americans since former ambassador Ken Taylor helped spring the hostages from Iran, or at least since the demise of the Mackenzie Brothers."²⁵

It is true that citizens of both countries can be a bit thin-skinned when deference to their national symbols is involved. As a writer for *USA Today* pointed out, perhaps the "U.S. fans should understand better than anyone the umbrage that can be taken over mishandling of a nation's flag."²⁶ From the onset, there was no shortage of "us versus them" sentiments expressed among fans and reporters, but after game 2, practically the entire focus of the World Series had shifted away from baseball and gone straight to nationalistic chest thumping. The Blue Jays' manager, Cito Gaston, expressed that he hoped the Marines had made an honest mistake, emphasizing that this "is not a battle between two countries, and hopefully, we can keep it that way."²⁷ However, it was obvious that to many fans this was not simply the Braves versus the Blue Jays; it *was* Canada versus the United States. The Jays wound up taking game 2, thanks to a home run in the ninth by pinch hitter, Ed Sprague, and in this, the Canadian fans had been momentarily appeased by the actual baseball aspect of the series. Still, the issue involving their beloved flag lingered and was going to make for an interesting and even

more highly anticipated first-ever World Series game to be played outside of the lower forty-eight.

The story continued two days later in Toronto where, naturally, the city was buzzing with anticipation of the Jays' turn to play on their home field. The break between games provided plenty of time to escalate tension the wake of the flag *faux pas* in Atlanta. Outside of the SkyDome, numerous fast-to-react street vendors fueled the spirit of friendly vengeance by peddling memorabilia made in special recognition of the flag bearing flop. You might say it was Canadian-style grassroots capitalism at its finest. Besides, "what good is a controversy if someone can't make a couple of bucks?"²⁸ Americans joked, "See? This whole flag controversy was just a secret plan to stimulate the Canadian economy. They should be thanking us."²⁹ Items for sale ranged from standard American flags (for customers to do with what they wished) to Canadian Flag t-shirts with an arrow and caption saying "This side up, eh?" All in good fun, but still it appeared as if the perfect storm was brewing for a raucous panorama of anti-Americanism. Once inside, however, the fans remained surprisingly respectful and lacked the hostility that so many predicted. The Canadians were wearing their world-famous civility and good manners on their sleeves.³⁰ Well, that and the common sense in knowing that overdoing America-bashing would not exactly help boost the morale of the American-born players and coaching staff that made-up the vast majority of their ball club.

This miniature international-relations crisis came to a climax when the SkyDome announcer took the microphone to address the 51,813 anxious fans. "To correct this

unfortunate error and show their true respect for the Canadian people," he said, "the Marine guard has requested the privilege of again carrying the flag of Canada and have requested that the Stars and Stripes be carried by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police."³¹ Upon commencement of the *The Star Spangled Banner*, "the predominantly Canadian crowd not only stood without protest but also joined in singing."³² This time, the anthems were sung by Canadian Anne Murray and Cuban-American Jon Secada, and the flags of both nations were flown in proper fashion. The media took notice and commended the Canadian fans for their restraint. *The Boston Globe* wrote about the "world-class, forgiving fans of Toronto" and *The Toronto Star* told the fans to "take a bow for the way they handled themselves" at the game.³³ If the Marines' redeeming act did not alone defuse the tension in Toronto that day, the 3-2 Blue Jays victory in the first-ever World Series game played on Canadian soil, or Astro turf, certainly did.

The games that followed were more or less baseball as usual. Newspapers returned to covering the scores and highlights rather than focusing on the digressive political sub-plot that had developed. For the most part, fans, too, saw that the bubble had burst, and it was time to get on with the series. The Jays won the series in game 6 in Atlanta, successfully making the transition from first Canadian team to play in the World Series to first Canadian team to *win* it. The morning after the victory, Radio Canada aired a cleverly edited sound bite that included the game announcer's call of the final out dubbed overtop of the song "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." Just to ensure that Canada's imprint on MLB history was not a mere one-hit wonder, the Jays repeated the feat in 1993 against the Philadelphia Phillies, again in six games. The

second time around was just as sweet, but understandably there was something exceptional about the 1992 win. Although the Blue Jays-inspired national unity of '92 was rather ephemeral when considering the much larger, exceedingly more consequential issues of the day, it was nonetheless a special time for Canadians. As for the international controversy, perhaps "the most Canadian thing about The Flag Crisis was the rapid emergence of sober second thoughts."³⁴ After all, if you take away the nationalistic hype, geopolitical border-crossing, diplomacy, and flag flipping, the series was, as always, one of great baseball.

NOTES

¹ The Jays finished in last place every season beginning in 1977 (expansion year) through 1982. Considering the split season in 1981, this streak was essentially seven last place seasons in six years. Explained in Guy Waterman, "Baseball Dynasties: Top and Bottom," *NINE* 10, no. 1 (Fall 2001): 100-01.

² James Deacon, "The Passport Series," *Maclean's*, October 26, 1992, 86-87.

³ National sports teams in Canada have a long history of fostering unified support (at the Olympics, etc.) among Canadians. However, cross-national backing of a team from a single Canadian city was and is rare. Ice hockey provides the obvious example. It is well-established that in recent history the Toronto Maple Leafs are outwardly despised in many parts of Canada. Sports teams aside, the city of Toronto is often singled-out and resented throughout the country. In 2007 a Canadian film company produced a humorous cross-Canada documentary entitled "Let's All Hate Toronto" (title taken from a 1956 satirical cartoon/caricature book of the same name). See <http://www.letsallhateto.com/>

⁴ John Herd Thompson and Stephen J. Randall, *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies*, 3rd ed. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2002), 291. Note: The following season, outfielder Rob Butler joined the Jays, who then went on to win their second consecutive championship. In this, Butler became the first Canadian to play on a World Series winning team.

⁵ Quoted in William Gildea, "In Toronto, One Pennant, Many Upside-Down Flags," *Washington Post*, October 21, 1992.

⁶ When Major League Baseball first expanded north (Montreal in 1969 and Toronto in 1977) some of the most obstinate Canadian nationalists saw it just the opposite. It was the American game expanding to

Canada, and many cried foul as they viewed this as further evidence of “Americanization” and the cultural decline of their country. However, by this point, baseball at various levels had already been a part of Canadian culture for well over a century.

⁷ Frank Hyland, “Message to Toronto: This is OUR Game!,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 17, 1992.

⁸ W.P. Kinsella “Crossing the Border.” In *A Series for the World: Baseball’s First International Fall Classic* (San Francisco, CA: Woodford Press, 1992), 19-24.

⁹ Quoted in Julian Beltram, “Constitution: It’s All Over but the Voting: Confusion Dogs Final Pitch to Canadians by Yes Side,” *Vancouver Sun*, October 26, 1992.

¹⁰ The defeat of the Charlottetown Accord was viewed as a vote of “non-confidence” for Prime Minister Mulroney and the Progressive Conservative “Tory” Party in general. Upon Mulroney’s resignation, Kim Campbell took over party leadership and the Prime Ministership only to be handed a swift defeat in the 1993 general election where the Liberal Party’s overwhelming victory brought upon the unprecedented plummet of Tory-occupied parliamentary seats (from 153 to 2).

¹¹ Julian Beltram, “Constitution: It’s All Over but the Voting: Confusion Dogs Final Pitch to Canadians by Yes Side,” *Vancouver Sun*, October 26, 1992.

¹² Tom Cochrane was also criticized for flubbing on a line of the Canadian national anthem and appearing generally rushed and nervous. Fortunately for him, the Marines took care of diverting much of the attention away from his discomfiting moment.

¹³ Quoted in Chuck Johnson, “Canada Flips over Flopped Maple Leaf,” *USA Today*, October 20, 1992.

¹⁴ “Flag, If Not Jays, Was Upended,” *WORLD SERIES: Notebook*, *New York Times*, October 19, 1992.

¹⁵ Neil A. Campbell, “U.S. Colour Guard Goofs, Flies Maple Leaf Upside Down,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 19, 1992

¹⁶ Quoted in Mike Shannon, *Tales from the Dugout* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1998), 209.

¹⁷ Ironically, Toronto was among the non-selected host city candidates for the 1996 Summer Olympics.

¹⁸ Neil A. Campbell, “The Maple Leaf is Flown Upside Down, The Umpire Blows a Crucial Call, but Toronto Thumbs Nose at Early Omens,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 19, 1992.

¹⁹ Alan Fraser, “Toronto Poised to Steal a Piece of Apple Pie,” *Daily Mail* (London), October 22, 1992.

²⁰ Chris Clarke quoted in Erik Brady, “Uh-O Canada: U.S. Flagged,” *USA Today*, October 20, 1992.

²¹ Lewis Grizzard, “Oh, Canada: Please shut up about the flag,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, October 21, 1992.

²² Stephen Brunt, “Fans Forget Flag Flap as Jays Triumph in Ninth. Apologies Accepted, Decorum Reigns at SkyDome,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 21, 1992.

²³ Quoted in M. Rucci, “Canada Flag ‘Insult’ Hits World Series,” *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), October 21, 1992.

²⁴ Quoted in "I Value Our Friendship with Canada," *Toronto Star*, October 20, 1992.

²⁵ Stephen Brunt, "Fans Forget Flag Flap as Jays Triumph in Ninth. Apologies Accepted, Decorum Reigns at SkyDome," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 21, 1992.

²⁶ Tom Weir, "Don't Turn Reasoning Upside Down," *USA Today*, October 21, 1992.

²⁷ Quoted in Tom Knott, "Flagging Patience; Canadians see inverted banner as proof Americans don't know which end is up," *Washington Times*, October 20, 1992.

²⁸ Michael Farber, "Flap Over Flag Flop Fizzles When U.S. Sends in Marines," *Gazette* (Montreal), October 21, 1992.

²⁹ Tom Weir, "Don't Turn Reasoning Upside Down," *USA Today*, October 21, 1992.

³⁰ This is not to say that this is always the case. In several instances Canadian home crowd fans have booed "The Star Spangled Banner" at professional hockey games. Hockey being much more able to provoke nationalistic responses in Canada, this is not necessarily surprising.

³¹ Stephen Brunt, "Fans Forget Flag Flap as Jays Triumph in Ninth. Apologies Accepted, Decorum Reigns at SkyDome," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 21, 1992.

³² Claire Smith, "Marines Rally 'Round the Maple Leaf, Easing a Flap," *New York Times*, October 21, 1992.

³³ Dan Shaughnessy, "This Series Showed the Best Games in Town." *The Boston Globe*, October 26, 1992 and Dave Perkins, "Fans Handle Flag Fallout with Restraint and Class," *Toronto Star*, October 21, 1992.

³⁴ Stephen Brunt, "Fans Forget Flag Flap as Jays Triumph in Ninth. Apologies Accepted, Decorum Reigns at SkyDome," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), October 21, 1992.