

US Congress witch-hunts players in baseball steroids scandal

David Walsh, Barry Grey
19 March 2005

Hypocrisy and vindictiveness held center stage in Washington on Thursday at the House Government Reform Committee's televised hearing into the use of steroids in baseball. The attacks on former player Mark McGwire, in particular, which continued in the media on Friday, amounted to little more than a witch-hunt.

The hearing, sanctimoniously entitled "Restoring Faith in America's Pastime," was purportedly held to investigate a public health crisis: the widespread use of steroids by young athletes. The issue is a legitimate matter of social concern. But how the issuing of subpoenas, an extraordinary measure, to a half-dozen former and present ballplayers would prove of the slightest assistance in the matter, no one on the House panel explained, and no one in the media bothered to ask.

Early in the hearing the committee heard testimony from parents whose sons committed suicide after using steroids. No doubt encouraged by the general tone of the official discussion on the issue, Donald Hooton, whose son Taylor, a Plano, Texas baseball player, killed himself in 2003, launched into an attack on the players, calling them "cowards."

The committee members, Republican and Democrat alike, pointed fingers, lectured and harangued a number of prominent former and current players, Mark McGwire in particular, as well as the players' union leader and the commissioner of baseball. They blasted the new drug testing plan introduced this year in major league baseball, before its effectiveness could possibly be assessed. Under the new plan, every player will undergo at least one unannounced test on a randomly selected date during the playing season. Any player who tests positive for a proscribed performance-enhancing substance will be subject to suspension and fines.

On this issue, as with every other social problem in America, the onus is placed entirely on the individual offender, and the only solution anyone in the political or media establishment offers is harsher punishment and stiffer penalties.

This was a bipartisan response. Rep. Thomas Davis of Virginia, a Republican who presided over the hearing, noted that the two parties were united on the steroids issue. Rep. Henry Waxman of California, the ranking Democrat on the committee, who requested the hearing, chastised baseball for not acting "to protect the integrity of baseball or send the right message to millions of teenagers who idolize ballplayers." Waxman, who cultivates something of a muckraking image, was particularly obnoxious, speaking over and attempting to bully players and other witnesses

with whom he disagreed.

McGwire, named by former teammate Jose Canseco as a steroid user in a recent book, quite properly refused to answer whether or not he had ever used the substances. Under the circumstances, he would have placed himself in serious legal jeopardy, however he answered the question.

None of the players were granted the immunity that would have allowed them to speak freely, because such a move would have put a damper on the politicians' grandstanding. The congressmen apparently hoped to force the players to plead the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination, which would have immediately been interpreted by the media as the equivalent of an admission of guilt.

In a prepared statement, McGwire, who in 1998 set a new season record by hitting 70 home runs (since surpassed by Barry Bonds), told the committee, "I will use whatever influence and popularity that I have to discourage young athletes from taking any drug that is not recommended by a doctor. What I will not do, however, is participate in naming names and implicating my friends and teammates." He continued: "If a player answers 'No,' he simply will not be believed. If he answers 'Yes,' he risks public scorn and endless government investigations."

Garrison Nelson, a congressional historian and professor of political science at the University of Vermont, told a reporter he was reminded of the House Un-American Activities Committee investigation of alleged Communist influence in Hollywood in the late 1940s. "They [the Committee members] brought in all these stars ... and they got this big publicity stunt, which they craved. And I'm afraid this hearing has those same qualities."

Rep. Davis claimed at the outset that he was not "interested in embarrassing anyone, or ruining careers or grandstanding. This is not a witch-hunt, and I am not looking to have witnesses 'name names.'" The committee then proceeded to do precisely what Davis said it would not do.

Democrats and Republicans berated McGwire for refusing to provide potentially incriminating answers to their questions. When the retired player told the committee at one point, "I'm not here to talk about the past," his remark elicited an especially absurd outburst from Rep. Mark Souder, an Indiana Republican and one of the more loutish interrogators, who wondered how Watergate would have turned out if the Nixon administration had not wanted to talk about the past.

Souder further pontificated, "As far as this being about the past,

that's what we do! We're an oversight committee. If the Enron people came in here and said 'We don't want to talk about the past,' do you think Congress is gonna let 'em get away with that?"

Unfortunately, McGwire was not capable of pointing out that Nixon and his cronies were accused of plotting against the US constitution and Enron officials of looting billions from the nation's economy and helping to bankrupt its largest state, while the only charge leveled against him, in a sensational, "tell-all" baseball memoir, was using performance-enhancing drugs, many of which were legal in baseball at the time he allegedly used them.

The media weighed in against McGwire on Friday, calling him a "coward" and "evasive," "whiny" and "petty." Setting the tone, the *New York Times* zeroed in on the former player, headlining its lead article on the steroid issue, "McGwire Offers No Denials at Steroid Hearings." The *New York Daily News* proclaimed the former home-run slugger the "biggest fool on the hill."

A legion of sports writers, as a rule the most ignorant and loudmouthed faction of the generally miserable American journalistic corps, could not resist from piling on. The *Boston Globe's* Dan Shaughnessy asserted that McGwire "was forever tarnished in the eyes of the nation." Gwen Knapp of the *San Francisco Chronicle* intoned, "If Mark McGwire revived Major League Baseball in 1998, he disgraced the game in equal measure Thursday."

No one in the media asked why the owners had not been hauled into the hearing room. Canseco may be a snitch for "naming names" in his book, but he was entirely on the mark in his prepared statement when he accused Major League Baseball of condoning the use of steroids to stir up fan interest through an explosion of long-ball hitting.

In his statement, the former player told the committee, "I did not write my book to single out any one individual or player. I am saddened that the media and others have chosen to focus on the names in the book and not on the real culprit behind the issue. ...

"Why did I take steroids? The answer is simple. Because myself and others had no choice if we wanted to continue playing. Because MLB did nothing to take it out of the sport. ...

"Baseball owners and the players union have been very much aware of the undeniable fact that as a nation we will do anything to win. They turned a blind eye to the clear evidence of steroid use in baseball. Why? Because it sold tickets and resurrected a game that had recently suffered a black eye from a player strike [in 1994]. The result was an intentional act by baseball to promote, condone and encourage the players to do whatever they had to do to win games, bring back the fans, and answer the bottom line."

Neither Canseco nor the other players are angels. Professional sport in America is deeply corrupting of everyone involved. Vast sums of money, as well as the desperate need to divert a restive population with "bread and circuses," have distorted baseball and the other major sports almost beyond recognition. Nonetheless, the primary responsibility for illegal drug use lies with the baseball owners, their "anything-to-win" outlook and fixation on profits. The game has suffered, as have individual players.

As highly paid as they may be, professional athletes' careers do not generally last long. Between 1940 and 1990, the average

baseball pitcher lasted 5.6 years in the major leagues, the average non-pitcher 6.7 years. The abuse of steroids and other drugs, while it has short-term benefits, seriously damages an individual's health.

Anabolic steroids, for example, have numerous potential and well-known side-effects, including jaundice and liver damage, mood swings, depression and aggression. In males, large concentrations of such substances may produce baldness, infertility and breast development; in females, hair growth on face and body, suppression of the menstrual cycle, thickening of the vocal chords and, if pregnant, interference with a developing fetus. Human growth hormones, another athlete's drug of choice, can result in the overgrowth of hands, feet and face, as well as enlarged internal organs and heart problems.

The very fact that a good number of top players feel compelled to endanger themselves by using such drugs points to the enormous pressures to which they are subjected—by the owners, the media and the "winning-is-everything" culture that is part and parcel of the politically reactionary climate in the US.

McGwire, Bonds and other star players may very well have used steroids. Certainly their stark physical transformations and record-breaking exploits during what would normally be the final and declining years of a baseball career suggest as much. Nevertheless, they are being singled out and scapegoated in an attempt to shift attention from the cut-throat practices of baseball's owners and American big business in general.

None of the gentlemen congressmen on the panel, Democrats or Republicans, dared allude to one of the allegations in Canseco's book on baseball and steroids. The former player wrote that one of the baseball owners who must have known of steroid use was a part-owner of the Texas Rangers in the 1990s—George W. Bush.

Bush himself has seized on the steroids issue to burnish his "law-and-order" and "values" credentials. In his State of the Union address, he issued a pious denunciation of use of the drugs in baseball.

The supposed concern of the White House and Congress for America's youth begs the obvious question of why they have sent tens of thousands to Iraq to be killed or mutilated in a war of colonial plunder.

A century ago one of America's greatest writers coined an aphorism that serves well to capture the essence of Thursday's spectacle on Capitol Hill. It was Mark Twain who remarked that in America, "there is no distinctly native criminal class, except Congress."



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