The Pilgrims Come to America: A Failed Mission of British Cultural Imperialism

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“I have no desire to attack your American institutions,” said the Englishman, Sir Ernest Cochrane, in regard to Association football, “but to simply point out the advantages of ‘socker’ football over the game played here. If once properly introduced it cannot but gain a stronghold on the American public, and I feel satisfied that the day is not far off when the sport will become as popular in this country as in England.” During September and October 1905, the Pilgrims, a British amateur Association football team, made a historic visit to Canada and the United States. Within forty-five days, the Pilgrims invaded a dozen North American cities and played 17 games against local club and college teams, winning 14, losing 2, and drawing 1, outscoring their opponents by 80 goals, 96 to 16.

The Mission of the Pilgrims

The mission of the Pilgrims was to demonstrate the superiority and advantages of Association football (i.e., soccer) to the American public. They particularly wanted to introduce soccer to the leading colleges on the east coast, thus beginning a boom for the sport and eventually replacing the American form of college football. It was an attempt of the British cultural imperialists to convince the American people to submit to the superiority of British culture. This essay explores the imperialistic nature of the Pilgrims visit to Canada and the United States, focusing on the Pilgrims’ missionary tour as a failure in North America.

The Pilgrims’ tour was sanctioned by The English Football Association, with the full financial support of London press tycoon, Sir Alfred Harmsworth. His representative, Charles Murray, the Pilgrims’ manager, had spent years promoting the sport. To introduce soccer into American

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colleges, he was willing to spend another $25,000 to furnish the leading American colleges with free services from the most skilled English coaches. Before the Pilgrims sailed for America, Sir Ernest Cochrane, an enthusiastic advocate of the English game, had donated a silver cup worth $500 for matches between the American, Canadian, and British football teams.

To the British promoters, Association football was a superior game. It depended on scientific manipulation of the ball rather than the sheer weight and strength of American football. In the game, the light person had a more equal chance with the giant. Soccer was thought to be free of dangerous accidents and required agility, endurance, quick perception, good judgment, and above all “thorough command of the ball solely by feet when traveling at top speed.” American college football, on the other hand, was considered inferior. “I cannot see much merit in the football game as played by the American colleges,” commented Fred Milnes, the Pilgrims’ captain. “It is involved, unscientific, and puts a premium on brute strength.” John Morgan, a popular English sportsman, pointed out that the frequent stoppages of American football could hardly make the event interesting from a spectator’s viewpoint: “Looking at a fast game under North Union [England] rules, and then looking on a so-called fast game between Yale and Harvard is like turning from viewing a horse race and watching cart-horses going through the same performance.”

**Perfect Timing of the Tour**

The Pilgrims’ visit coincided with great public concern about the brutality and ethics of American football. During the previous season, more than twenty deaths had resulted from football injuries. Earlier in the year, President Theodore Roosevelt pleaded that the violence in college football be eliminated and the ethics of the game raised. Speaking at the Harvard Alumni meeting, the president delivered the following message, which was meant to be heard by the entire nation:

Brutality in playing a game should awaken the heartiest and most plainly shown contempt for the player guilty of it, especially if this brutality is coupled with a low cunning in committing it without getting caught by the umpire. I hope to see both graduate and undergraduate opinion come to scorn such a man as one guilty of base and dishonorable action, who has no place in the regard of gallant and upright men.

Weeks into the 1905 season, reports on brutal and unethical plays continued, and demands for reform and abolishment of the game reached an all-time high. Under public pressure and committed to eliminating brutality in the college game, Roosevelt invited the coaches and athletic representatives of the three leading universities, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton,