Betting On Baseball: America’s Game and Its Relationship with Gambling

September 29, 1920 will forever live in infamy as one of the darkest days of baseball. The hearts of fans across the country broke as one of the greatest players of the era, “Shoeless” Joe Jackson, emerged from Cook County Courthouse. One young fan stood out from the rest “exclaiming, ‘Say it ain’t so, Joe. Say it ain’t so,’ to which Jackson responded, ‘It’s so, kid.’”¹ With this simple statement, the first great gambling scandal in American professional baseball shook the nation, leaving some fans in disbelief, some in anger, and some in pure misery watching their heroes fall from grace.

Baseball has long been “America’s game,” a game which mirrors the nation’s values of honesty, integrity, and respect. As Robin Bachin, assistant professor of history at the University of Miami puts it, the keys to the popularity of baseball are “its rules promoting discipline, order, and self-sacrifice as a means of instilling nationalism and loyalty in the urban working-class.”² The “American Dream” is founded on a similar commitment to the necessity of hard work and virtue found in the working class of America. Baseball as a sport, and Major League Baseball (MLB) as the governing body of the sport, developed a reputation as an inherently American institution; unfortunately, in the case of the Black Sox, the greed and immorality of players and outside bettors tarnished the game to a point where some thought it could never recover. The resulting relationship between gambling and baseball, which continues to the present day, showcases the struggle to find harmony between the heralded game and the illicit world of sports gambling. Three key interactions stand out: the Chicago Black Sox scandal of 1919, the lifetime

² Bachin, Robin
ban of Pete Rose in 1989, and the recent deal that MLB made with daily fantasy sports site DraftKings. These three incidents vary slightly in nature: the Black Sox were paid to lose games, Pete Rose bet on games he was involved in as a manager, and DraftKings is a service that allows fans to gamble money on games each day. However, despite these differences, at the core of each incident is the struggle between baseball’s reputation as a sport of honesty, integrity, and respect and the often unethical institution of gambling. Exploring these three intersections and the subsequent messages the league sends sheds light on the core values of MLB as an institution. MLB’s responses to incidents of gambling in the game show that the league and the sport emphasize maintaining their American values above all other endeavors, allowing professional baseball to stand as a pillar of Americanism.

One cannot understate the importance of the game of baseball to the American people when defending baseball as a truly American enterprise and institution. Turning to moments of tragedy helps to illustrate the importance of baseball to the country; in his essay on this topic, renowned American historian Stephen Jay Gould describes President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1942 letter to the baseball commissioner, urging that baseball continue during World War II (Appendix A) as “the ultimate sign of baseball's importance to the fabric of America.” As a second example, President George W. Bush’s first pitch at Yankee Stadium in the month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Appendix B) served as a key healing moment for the nation. In the wake of tragedy, the nation turns to baseball as a source of patriotism and normalcy. What more could a sport strive to be? Baseball is the beating heart of the nation and the blood that runs through its veins. Jim Doherty challenged the nation to face the facts in an April 1991 issue of Smithsonian

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Magazine, asserting that, in America, “a neighborhood without a ball field is no neighborhood at all.” America is a country built upon small towns and rural communities, the working class, the average man; the national pastime appeals to and thus has a responsibility to those communities. In his analysis of the consistently high rate of publishing of books about baseball, James Roberts claims that “no other game is so widely played. None is so intimately shared by fathers and sons (and now daughters). None is so deeply embedded in the American psyche.” So, when the core values of the game are called into question as they are when the game intersects with the often illicit, crooked venue of sports gambling, the very essence of American life is called into question. When such incidents take place, it is up to the governing body of the sport, Major League Baseball, to determine the necessary action to protect the game, its values, and its connection to the country.

The first of the major gambling scandals in American professional baseball, the Chicago Black Sox scandal of 1919, necessitated a response due to the post-war increase in patriotism and the fans’ need to see that baseball as a representation of American values of hard work and integrity of character over the desire to make money. Before analyzing the response of the league, it is imperative to understand the social climate surrounding the event. Although there had been a myriad of cases of illegal gambling in professional baseball’s infancy, none of these cases had as significant an impact on the game as the Black Sox scandal did. The National Pastime Museum, in compiling a history of baseball, notes that throughout the nineteenth century, “again and again, baseball officials looked the other way, whitewashing all evidence of

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bribery and game-fixing. The players involved were rarely punished, nor were most of them even seriously investigated.” In general, professional baseball was so young and going through so many changes that game had not yet been able to take an institutional stand against gambling, nor had American society yet demanded a response. By 1919 though, baseball had accrued a greater social clout than ever before and its power was only augmented by the wave of patriotism that came along with the end of World War I. As Bachin put it in her study of the Black Sox scandal, “patriotism and the promotion of ‘one hundred percent Americanism’ subsumed all other issues both during and after the war.” In the wake of one of the most formative moments of the twentieth century, America’s game was forced to clean up its reputation as a moral institution.

The game of baseball served as an extension of Americanism, and the fans wanted, and needed, to see the institution of the game as a pure, corruption-free example of all that is great about America. With this intense patriotism on the brain, one of the first major sporting events after the war ended was the 1919 World Series, played between the Chicago White Sox and the Cincinnati Reds. Daniel Ginsburg explains the plan for the White Sox to throw the series in his book detailing the history of gambling in baseball as being a set of five $20,000 installments paid to eight players after each game of the World Series that they lost, for a grand total of $100,000. In a time when the game most needed to be clean, a time when players such as Joe Jackson, Chicago’s star outfielder, were the idols of boys across the Midwest, several players chose the money over the integrity of the game, tarnishing the reputation of the game and the American

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7 Bachin, Robin
ideals it represents. When the news of the fix broke to the public, the team was famously nicknamed the “Black Sox.” While MLB could not control these decisions directly, they could control their response. Their response was more than appropriate, catering to the American people and their patriotism. Bachin’s analysis of the incident concludes that “baseball ultimately was able to escape the Black Sox scandal relatively unscathed as a result of Americans’ unquestioned allegiance to and belief in the purity and integrity of American institutions.”

With the heightened sense of patriotism and the importance of baseball taking the nation by storm, the league fulfilled its American duties, complying with the needs of the people and handing out a harsh sentence, allowing the game to survive and continue as a pillar of true Americanism.

The expulsion of the members of the Black Sox involved in the fix, no matter their level of involvement, showcases how seriously MLB took protecting the integrity of the game. Evan Andrews’ history of the incident details that the Black Sox were, in the eyes of American law, found not guilty on all counts on August 2, 1921. Despite the ruling of the courts, MLB would not take it easy on the players. The recently appointed first commissioner of Major League Baseball, Kennesaw Mountain Landis, stated that “regardless of the verdict of the juries, no player who throws a ball game, no player that undertakes or promises to throw a ball game, no player who sits in confidence with a bunch of crooked players and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball!” With this proclamation, professional baseball took a firm stand on the issue of gambling and collusion: it will not be tolerated under any circumstances. Douglas Linder, in his account of the entire scandal, details that even though

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9 Bachin, Robin
11 Andrews, Evan
“[Joe] Jackson clearly did accept the money of gamblers… [and] admitted in his 1920 grand jury testimony to accepting the money” his stat line suggests that “[m]ost likely, Jackson did not try to throw the Series.”\(^\text{12}\) Linder reports that “[f]or the Series, Jackson had batted .375 (nearly twenty points better than his career average of .356), scored five runs, got six RBI's, the only homerun, and not committed a single error.”\(^\text{13}\) Despite the lack of evidence that Jackson made any attempt to throw games, he was still banned for life. Teammate Buck Weaver, who “failed to report the scheme to club officials… [but] played the best baseball he knew how”\(^\text{14}\) was still banned for life even though “it’s not clear he ever received a dime from the fix.”\(^\text{15}\) These players may not have actually intentionally lost games, but their involvement in the fix was more than enough to warrant a lifetime ban. Major League Baseball made it clear that there is no place in the league for anybody who partakes in illegal or immoral behavior that jeopardizes the honesty of the game and continues to uphold this viewpoint by maintaining the ban of the players to this day.

The serious action taken in response to the Black Sox scandal, the formation of the office of the commissioner to handle matters such as this and the subsequent expulsion of all involved parties from Major League Baseball, reaffirmed professional baseball as an American institution and set a precedent for future incidents. ESPN analyst Rob Neyer notes that several years after banning eight members of the Black Sox, in 1927, Landis proposed new rules dealing with the

\(^{13}\) Linder, Douglas  
\(^{14}\) Linder, Douglas  
\(^{15}\) Linder, Douglas
issue of gambling on baseball, which were all accepted and immediately put into effect. The most notable of these was Rule 21, part d, which states:

(d) BETTING ON BALL GAMES. Any player, umpire, or club official or employee, who shall bet any sum whatsoever upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has no duty to perform shall be declared ineligible for one year. Any player, umpire, or club or league official or employee, who shall bet any sum whatsoever upon any baseball game in connection with which the bettor has a duty to perform shall be declared permanently ineligible.

This rule is as clear as it could possibly be. There is no way to misinterpret it or claim ignorance. Major League Baseball’s clarity on the issue of gambling on baseball highlights its commitment to protecting the game. Incidents of players gambling on the game detract from fan’s enjoyment by suggesting that the game is pre-scripted, which takes away the key part of sports that anything is possible and questions the overall integrity of any game. Robin Bachin asserts that “the man at bat, cheer him or hoot at him as we may, is supposed to be doing his best. There is something about the very nature of the game, played in the bright sunlight with nerves at the very edge of tension, that produces the illusion of a cleanliness in the characters of the performers.” By taking a clear, firm stance against gambling on the game by inside personnel, MLB hoped to ensure that everyone played the game to the best of their abilities, thus making sure that fans received the best product possible. This rule not only helps maintain the purity of competition and integrity of the game, but also sets a precedent that necessitates a similarly serious response to any other incident that takes place.

The game would go decades without another betting scandal, but in 1989 a new issue threatened to sully the reputation of the game. When Pete Rose, the all-time hits leader, was

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18 Bachin, Robin
banned for life for betting on games he was involved in as a manager, the league reaffirmed their
staunch position against gambling in the game, maintaining the rules put into place after the
Black Sox scandal. Murray Chass of *The New York Times* wrote an article the day that news of
the expulsion broke, detailing that Rose “repeatedly denied that he bet on baseball games, despite
voluminous testimony to the contrary by witnesses in an investigation by the commissioner that
was headed by John Dowd, a Washington lawyer working as a special counsel to [A. Bartlett]
Giamatti,” who was the commissioner at the time. Rose’s choice to bet on games he was
managing served to end his baseball career; what would go on to be known as the “Dowd
Report” states that “testimony and the documentary evidence gathered in the course of the
investigation demonstrates that Pete Rose bet on baseball, and in particular, on games of the
Cincinnati Reds Baseball Club, during the 1985, 1986 and 1987 seasons.” Rose was banned for
life. The mere fact that the game went well over half a century without another major gambling
scandal speaks to the power and effectiveness of the aforementioned Rule 21. Eric Macramalla, a
sports legal analyst for a variety of news sources such as ESPN, NBC Sports, and CBS Sports,
points out that

> It is impossible for a player not to be aware of Rule 21. It’s everywhere. It’s posted in the
clubhouse. It’s in the shower. It’s carved into soap. It’s in the sandwiches. Every player
every year acknowledges the rule in writing. The ubiquity of the rule underscores its
importance. Rose knew the rule and broke it.

The all-time hits leader could not escape the fate prescribed by Rule 21, despite his immense
success as a player and his popularity as a baseball personality. Baseball proved that no player

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20 "THE PETE ROSE INQUIRY; Excerpts From Report Submitted by Dowd to Commissioner Giamatti." *New York

was greater than the game itself; MLB was not willing to sacrifice its reputation or the values it represents for any reason.

The years between the Black Sox and the Rose incidents saw a shift in the role of the game in the nation; with the introduction of free agency, it became clear that baseball was just as much an economically profitable institution as it was a national pastime. In 1977, shortly after a supreme court ruling decided that MLB players have a right to free agency, David Saxe of *The New York Times* questioned whether sports fans were “being tricked and belied by corporate types interested in only the fast buck, and greedy athletes more concerned with prime-time television exposure (to enhance their commercial value) than in excellent performance.”

The country had stopped seeing athletes and baseball players in particular as heroes and was beginning to question their morals as money began to play a larger and larger role in the game. An economic overview of sports in America in the 1980’s reported that “baseball still captured the nation's summertime attention” drawing in “over fifty-million fans annually… [with] revenue more than $1 billion a year.” While the game was as popular as it had ever been in the country, the economic side of the institution continued to cast a negative light on the game. As a result, when the Rose gambling controversy came about, the league needed to do everything it could to uphold its reputation as an American institution that it worked so hard to create.

MLB realized that in order to maintain its popularity, it had to uphold its position as a pillar of American morality; in its response to the Pete Rose incident, the league sought to protect the integrity of the game, not just uphold a rule put into place decades before. At the time,

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24 "The 1980s Sports: Overview."
Commissioner Giamatti cited the moral stains caused by Rose’s actions to be his biggest fault, not the simple fact that he broke the rules. Giamatti acknowledged that “this institution will not always fulfill its highest aspirations… But this one, because it is so much a part of our history as a people, and because it has such a purchase on our national soul, has an obligation to the people for whom it’s played.” He cited going further than just the letter of the law and seeing the bigger impact Rose’s actions have on the reputation of the game, which stands for so much in American culture. Clearly, Giamatti prioritized the integrity of the game. He could have simply hidden behind Rule 21, citing that he had no choice but to ban Rose; instead, he restated the necessity of the rule, affirming the importance of the integrity of the game and those who play it.

The Rose saga continued throughout the following decades and still comes up to this day; the league maintains Rose’s ban, refusing to let him back into the game while he still stands as a symbol of corruption in the game. In 2004, The New York Times reported on Rose’s book in which he admits to betting on the game, saying that it began “setting in motion a process that may win him reinstatement to baseball and election to the Hall of Fame.” However, the league does not see this as a possibility. In 2015, the MLB all-star game took place in Cincinnati, where Rose spent his career as a player and manager. Inevitably, the topic of Rose’s reinstatement was brought up, and current commissioner Robert Manfred asserted that “Mr. Rose has not presented credible evidence of a reconfigured life either by an honest acceptance by him of his wrongdoing… or by a rigorous, self-aware and sustained program of avoidance by him of all the circumstances that led to his permanent ineligibility in 1989.”

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into the game; not only because Rule 21 so clearly demands a permanent ban, but because he has shown no signs of becoming a more morally upright person. Rose, the all-time hits leader, does have the support of many fans, however. Marty Brennamen, the play-by-play announcer for the Reds, claims that “Pete remains so popular in Cincinnati that if he ran for mayor, he’d be elected in a landslide.”\textsuperscript{28} Despite this fact, the league is not willing to look past his moral transgressions. Rose broke a rule, but, more importantly, he stained the integrity of the game; a mistake that MLB will not forgive. As much as Rose’s ban has to do with Rule 21, it has just as much if not more to do with protecting the integrity of the game from the collusion that comes along with gambling.

Since the time of the Rose incident, the league has continued to evolve; as early as 1998, it was clear that baseball’s popularity in the country had fallen. According to Curt Smith in a 1998 issue of \textit{The National Review}, “In a Lou Harris poll in 1964, 48 percent of Americans named baseball their favorite sport. This year, says Gallup, 17 percent did.”\textsuperscript{29} Furthermore, a 1994 poll of kids ages nine to twelve by Sports Illustrated reports that basketball beat baseball in terms of popularity by forty percentage points.\textsuperscript{30} The economic draw of baseball had fallen behind football as well, as “in 1996 and ’97, the World Series' Nielsen rating was barely half of 1980's 32.8.”\textsuperscript{31} As a response to the decline of the popularity of the game, MLB has made several different efforts to rebuild the national pastime. Most notably, the league has begun to adapt to new, technological trends. Its mobile-streaming app “MLB At-Bat,” according to a 2015 \textit{USA}

\textsuperscript{30} Smith, Curt
\textsuperscript{31} Smith, Curt
Today article, had over 1.3 billion minutes of consumption, a half-billion more than second place ESPN, and is the highest grossing sports app of all time.\textsuperscript{32} This is, of course, in addition to a hefty presence on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. These methods of increasing the popularity of the game seem relatively harmless; however, MLB has also begun a relationship with DraftKings, a Daily Fantasy Sports site that enables fans to create a daily lineup of players to enter into tournaments or head to head matchups, using and winning real money based on their players’ performances. In essence, DraftKings enables fans to gamble on the game, a decision that could be harmful to baseball’s reputation as a moral institution.

As antithetical as this relationship may seem to the firm stance taken against gambling in the game, it actually aligns with past rulings on the role of gambling in the game by increasing enjoyment of the game by fans; this method of gambling is different in that the fans gambling on the game do not have a direct impact on the outcome. Forbes reported in April of 2015 that “daily fantasy sports operator DraftKings has come to terms on a multi-year deal with Major League Baseball, which extends DraftKings’ existing partnership and makes it MLB’s “Official Daily Fantasy Game.”\textsuperscript{33} At first it may seem as though the league is being hypocritical; it takes such a staunch stance against players gambling on the game, yet it enables and even encourages fans to bet on the game by partnering with DraftKings. However, the league is only amplifying the enjoyment of the game for fans. The way fans enjoy the game has changed as tracking statistics in the form of fantasy sports has become more popular. In theory, allowing fans to


gamble on the game in a way that is monitored and equal for all removes a lot of the collusion that gambling otherwise could bring, and the fans are more interested in the game when they have a stake in it. In handling the Black Sox scandal and Pete Rose’s ban, Major League Baseball sought to protect the fans and ensure that they are seeing the best possible product. Eric Macramalla’s article also asserts that banning Pete Rose is not about simply following a rule, “it’s about ensuring that fans have assurances that games are not fixed or predetermined.” One of the joys of sports is that anything can happen. Take that away and you question the integrity of the game as a whole. The league still forbids that players partake in all gambling, including DraftKings. Tony Clark, president of the MLB players’ union, ensures that “we’ve made absolutely clear to our players and to our front office personnel that we do not believe that DraftKings – or any other daily fantasy – is an appropriate activity for them. We see a very clear distinction between people who can affect the outcome of the game and fans who want to engage through daily fantasy.” The core difference is that fans cannot affect the outcome of the game. Fans are not under the control of MLB; thus, their decisions on gambling are not MLB’s to make. The league continues to uphold their reputation and their morality by hoping to ensure that nobody will tamper with the outcome of a game because they have a monetary stake in it.

Major League Baseball is beginning to walk a fine line with its policies on the role of gambling in baseball, but as it stands so far, the league has continued to update its policies in order to keep the public happy while fulfilling its obligation to the country to be a morally upright institution. While Commissioner Robert Manfred has claimed, “I really don't have regrets

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34 Macramalla, Eric
about our involvement with fantasy” and that “fantasy is an important source of fan engagement,” he recognizes that he cannot go too far with his changes in order to maintain the game’s integrity. In a recent interview with ESPN, when asked about updating policies around various issues in the game, Manfred admits,

I think that the biggest challenge we face… is for our product to continue to evolve to be consonant with what’s going on in our society. And I think that challenge is particularly tough in baseball because you always have to balance change against the need to avoid harming the great traditions that underly our game.

His response demonstrates his knowledge of the game and the role it plays in American society. If the game owed nothing in the way of moral obligations to the country, then the league could move in a very different direction, possibly towards the complete legalization of all forms of betting. However, Manfred realizes that he must pay respect to the longstanding tradition of morality that baseball represents in American culture. Granted, the current rules for players surrounding the issue of Daily Fantasy are unclear. When Tony Clark said that DFS are not “an appropriate activity” for players or other MLB employees, it is far from the clear-cut denunciation of gambling seen in Rule 21. Clark’s statement seems to discourage players from taking part in DFS more than it completely bans it. If the league wants to hold its position as a transparent and morally upright institution, it should take a clearer stance. The league will have to carefully measure the integration of DFS into the game. Up until this point, MLB has tried its best to be dynamic and open-minded with its response to the issue so that it can move forward with society and continue to protect the integrity of the game. While some may question the potential hypocrisy of what ESPN columnist David Purdam calls “a dramatic shift from MLB's

longstanding staunch opposition [of gambling],” digging into the reasoning behind the shift allows fans to understand that the change is being made with both fan enjoyment and baseball tradition in mind.

Throughout the years, from the Black Sox, to Pete Rose, to DraftKings, Major League Baseball has aimed to and succeeded in answering the call of the people, fulfilling what they want and need from the game, while maintaining its position as a morally upright, truly American institution. While Major League Baseball is willing to update policies on gambling in order to amplify fan enjoyment of the game, they have shown that not everything that increases fan enjoyment will be allowed; the game will not sacrifice its integrity in order to make the game more exciting for fans. The issue of steroids, which became more prevalent during the 1990s, certainly amplified the fan experience. With performance-enhancing drugs came more home runs and consequently more excitement for the fans. However, MLB has made it clear that they do not want any involvement with performance enhancing drugs. Unlike allowing fans to gamble on players performances, this method of amplifying fan enjoyment sacrifices the moral integrity of the game; it gives one player an unfair advantage and effectively punishes an opponent who maintains his integrity and respect for the game. MLB has made it clear that its traditions, its core values of respect, honesty, and integrity that made it such an important sport in the country come first. The game’s moral code may diverge from the true legality of some actions, which is nothing to criticize; in fact, it encourages individuals to develop their own moral code, to draw a line when they feel that something that may be legal actually jeopardizes one’s integrity.

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Professional baseball has survived many ups and downs in 20th century America, standing as a pillar of true Americanism throughout this time; scholar and philosopher Morris Cohen asserts that “baseball is a religion, and the only one that is not sectarian but national.”

The nation’s only generally agreed upon religion owes something to its followers; it must uphold the American values it represents. The game was born out of American values, grew popular because of American values, and, therefore, must maintain these values in the face of adversity. The game has been far from clean over the years, but it has continued to emerge time and time again as a morally upright institution. The league’s reaction to incidents of gambling in the game best represent the league’s commitment to the American people, and to American ideals. A refusal to change with the times would be antithetical to the part of American culture that takes pride in updating its views as society progresses. Baseball, in its willingness to change while remaining true to its traditional values, thus represents the key parts of American culture as a whole.

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Appendix A - President Roosevelt’s Letter to Baseball

My Dear Judge:

Thank you for yours of January fourteenth. As you will, of course, realize the final decision about the baseball season must rest with you and the Baseball club owners - so what I am going to say is solely a personal and not an official point of view.

I honestly feel that it would be best for the country to keep baseball going. There will be fewer people unemployed and everybody will work longer hours and harder than ever before.

And that means that they ought to have a chance for recreation and for taking their minds off their work even more than before.

Baseball provides a recreation which does not last over two hours or two hours and a half, and which can be got for very little cost. And, incidentally, I hope that night games can be extended because it gives an opportunity to the day shift to see a game occasionally.

As to the players themselves, I know you agree with me that the individual players who are active military or naval age should go, without question, into the services. Even if the actual quality to the teams is lowered by the greater use of older players, this will not dampen the popularity of the sport. Of course, if an individual has some particular aptitude in a trade or profession, he ought to serve the Government. That, however, is a matter which I know you can handle with complete justice.

Here is another way of looking at it - if 300 teams use 5,000 or 6,000 players, these players are a definite recreational asset to at least 20,000,000 of the fellow citizens - and that in my judgment is thoroughly worthwhile.

With every best wish,

Very sincerely yours,

Franklin D. Roosevelt

Appendix B

Title: President Bush's Opening Pitch at Yankee Stadium After 9-11

Link: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpSLQ1ah94QFAmPUSB5W5DA

Photo Excerpts:

Works Cited


