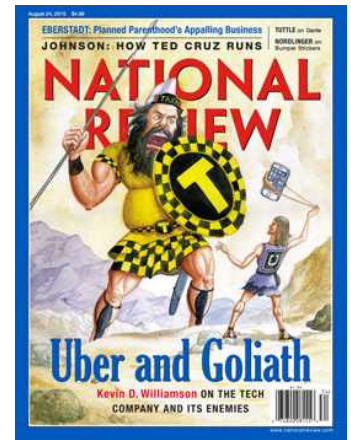


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VOLUME LXVII, NO. 15

ANDROID
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ARTICLES

CALCULATING CRUZ

The Texas senator is both ideological purist and shrewd tactician.

BY ELIANA JOHNSON

WHAT IS A SINGLE MOTHER?

The term encompasses several groups whose plights are different.

BY NICHOLAS H.
WOLFINGER

BORN IN THE U.S.A.

Children of immigrants face — and present — a unique set of challenges.

BY REIHAN SALAM

Babe Ruth and Jacob Ruppert

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by [NICHOLAS FRANKOVICH](#) August 24,
2015, Issue

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The Colonel and Hug: The Partnership That Transformed the New York Yankees, by Steve Steinberg and Lyle Spatz (Nebraska, 576 pp., \$34.95)

Mystique and Aura still perform their occasional magic for the New York Yankees but are slowing down. “Those are dancers in a nightclub,” Curt Schilling scoffed, before taking the ball and killing their juju in the 2001 World Series. He did it again in 2004, in the most improbable playoff series in the history of Major League Baseball. The reputation of the grand old girls never recovered. As their power to enchant the Pinstripe faithful and terrorize Yankee-haters from Montauk to Malibu gracefully fades away, like an old soldier, let us praise them. They were the glory of their times.

That’s how their story will end. How did it begin? It’s complicated.

You might put it like this: They were conceived in the mind of “Colonel” Jacob Ruppert. With another “Colonel” (though sometimes called “Cap,” because why not?), Til Huston, a freewheeling engineer who physically resembled Teddy Roosevelt, Ruppert bought the American League’s underachieving New York franchise on New Year’s Eve, 1914. A few disappointing seasons passed and

AJIT PAI’S FIGHT FOR INTERNET FREEDOM

Market-oriented cyber policies are best, says the FCC commissioner.

BY TIM HEFFERNAN

THE KIMONO KERFUFFLE

In Boston, a Monet painting reveals the Balkanized American mind.

BY ANDREW STUTTAFFORD

STICK IT TO ’EM

A world of bumper stickers.

BY JAY NORDLINGER

MY TOMBOY HEAVEN

Let’s not be so quick to deem kids transgendered.

BY SARAH RUDEN

FEATURES

DAVID BEHIND THE WHEEL

Uber takes on the yellow-checkered Goliath.

BY KEVIN D. WILLIAMSON

NO VIDEO, PLEASE; WE’RE KILLING SOMETHING

Why animal lovers should abhor Planned Parenthood.

BY MARY EBERSTADT

Ruppert hired Miller Huggins to manage the team. Through storm and stress over many years, Huggins gradually brought the owner's brainchild to birth.

Several other managerial geniuses had a hand in building up the franchise, of course. Three of them — Ed Barrow, George Weiss, and Joe McCarthy, all recruited by Ruppert — are in the Hall of Fame, as are Ruppert and Huggins. But the contribution that Ruppert and Huggins made was primary. It was seminal. It deserved far better than it got in the literature, which is pretty thick, on the club's first dynasty, 1921–64, the impossibly long run that made the Yankees the Yankees.

That roughly is the view of baseball historians Steve Steinberg and Lyle Spatz, who set out to redress a deficit in baseball scholarship. The result, *The Colonel and Hug*, is a run batted in. Make that two. To the casual fan, the face of those earliest Yankee championship teams is a composite of Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. The brain behind that face is the collaboration chiefly of Ruppert and Huggins, according to the authors, whose neuroimaging of the early Bronx

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

WHAT CAN-DO CONSERVATISM CAN'T DO

*William Voegeli
reviews The
Conservative Heart:
How to Build a Fairer,
Happier, and More
Prosperous America,
by Arthur C. Brooks.*

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How Dante Can Save
Your Life: The Life-
Changing Wisdom of
History's Greatest
Poem, by Rod Dreher.*

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Model: Political
Meritocracy and the
Limits of Democracy,
by Daniel A. Bell.*

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*Nicholas Frankovich
reviews The Colonel
and Hug: The
Partnership That
Transformed the New
York Yankees, by
Steve Steinberg and
Lyle Spatz.*

CITY DESK: IN THE

Bombers adds a new perspective to our understanding of this celebrated American institution. (Full disclosure: The authors and I are friends.)

Ruppert and Huston wheeled and dealt a lot their first few years, but the team did not improve, so they did what owners do: They fired the manager. Huston wanted to bring in his friend Wilbert Robinson, who managed the Brooklyn Dodgers. Not one to waste your time, Ruppert met with Robinson before the 1918 season and reportedly told him, “No, you will not do. For one thing, you are too old.”

League president Ban Johnson tried to sell Ruppert on Huggins, the younger but seasoned manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. From a distance, Ruppert, a beer magnate and former congressman who knew his way around Edith Wharton’s New York, had always been put off by the skipper’s working-class look, as he deemed it — the wool hat, the smoking a pipe in public — but took an instant liking to him at the interview. The veteran manager and former second baseman was all business and knew his stuff. Baseball IQ? Off the charts. Ruppert

BELLY OF A FRIENDLY BEAST
Richard Brookhiser discusses the friendly state.

SECTIONS

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE WEEK

THE LONG VIEW
ROB LONG

ATHWART
JAMES LILEKS

POETRY
WILLIAM W. RUNYEON

HAPPY WARRIOR
JONAH GOLDBERG

signed him to a deal while Huston protested by telegram from France.

Huggins was built like a jockey, standing five feet six inches short and weighing 120 pounds, 20 fewer than his weight in the baseball databases. John McGraw called him a “shrimp.” Huggins made up for it in tenacity, like a terrier.

He was cunning. “No suitor ever laid out as careful a plan to obtain his love as I,” he reminisced years later, describing his childhood crush on the national pastime. Being single-minded, he got what he sought. It was enough. “He had simple tastes,” the authors note. “He did not seem to have an active social life. He never married, though” — trigger warning: understated poignancy ahead — “he dated the future wife of Reds pitcher Bob Ewing.”

The dark cloud that hung over Huggins all his life thickened in his early years with the Yankees. The New York press soured on him fast. Players complained about his strict discipline and joined reporters in questioning his pitching decisions.

In 1920, Ruppert bought Ruth's contract from the Red Sox, at Huggins's urging, and introduced into the Yankee clubhouse Hug's antithesis, a burly, rowdy presence and force of nature. In 1921, some Yankees considered approaching Huston to request that he fire their manager. "When Hug admonished the players for some of their pranks off the field, they simply laughed at him," sportswriter Frank Graham explained. "They had reason to believe that any shackles placed on them by Huggins would be struck off by Cap [Huston]."

Huston badmouthed him to the newspapers. A bon vivant and hail-fellow-well-met, "Cap" had little regard for his tightly wound manager — "a nervous and unhealthy man," the authors call him — or for Ruppert's friend Ban Johnson, a Huggins admirer against whom Huston waged an open vendetta. In the public eye, Huston overshadowed the buttoned-down Ruppert during their eight years of co-ownership, but Ruppert outlasted him.

The two clashed toward the end, and

Huston wanted out. Ruppert wanted him out. Ruppert bought him out, for \$1.5 million. Shortly after Yankee Stadium opened in 1923, Huston was gone officially, and Ruppert exhaled. The franchise was soaring. In October, the Bombers met the Giants in the World Series for the third consecutive year and won their first world championship.

Ruth was the main attraction but disruptive. He despised Huggins, whom he once picked up “like a doll” and threatened to throw off a moving train — probably in 1925, when the Yankees tanked, finishing in seventh place and 16 games under .500. In late August, after Huggins suspended Ruth for excessive carousing and breaking curfew, Ruth appealed to the owner. They met at Ruppert’s office at his brewery. Both no doubt appreciated that Ruth was the greatest box-office draw the game ever knew. He was a baseball god, and doesn’t a baseball god get what a baseball god wants? Overrule your manager, Mr. Ruppert. Fire him, while you’re at it.

Ruppert told him to get lost. “Anything Miller Huggins says, goes with me,” he

announced after the meeting. “I will support him to the limit. Huggins is running the club, not Ruth. Ruth can do as he pleases. He can quit if he wants to.”

The team as a whole was “gone,” Huggins confessed to the Colonel. “Just gone. I have tried everything — threats, cajolery, everything — but I can’t get a rise out of it.”

“Get rid of them,” Ed Barrow said. By now Barrow was in effect the general manager and was running a tight ship in the front office. “We’ll get a new team.” Years later, Barrow called it “the turning point in the history of the New York Yankees. Thereafter the so-called bad boys realized that we meant business.”

Steinberg and Spatz could have added Barrow to the Yankees’ innermost circle of two, the Colonel and Hug, and made it a triumvirate of tough-minded, like-minded baseball architects, but Barrow’s definitive biography has already been published, like this book, by Nebraska, the gold standard for baseball history.

Huggins died in 1929, at age 50, after

shepherding the Yankees to six pennants and three world championships over twelve seasons. When Ruppert died, in 1939, Joe McCarthy, another of his hires, was in the middle of an even more impressive stretch.

Through an apostolic succession of field managers and front-office executives who could trace their Yankee lineage back to Ruppert either directly or through no more than two degrees of separation, the organization maintained its Yankee Mystique and its Aura of Yankee invincibility for a quarter century after the death of the paterfamilias. Over a span of 44 seasons, from the Harding to the Johnson administration, it won 29 pennants and 20 world championships, 74 percent of the world championships it has won to date.

The brilliance of that record has reached across decades and cast later, less spectacular Yankee achievements in a certain light. It's what made the average fan so starry-eyed in the face of the Bombers' subsequent two runs, 1976–81 (four pennants and two world championships) and 1996–2003 (six and

four). And didn't you feel something special too about their winning the World Series in 2009, the only standalone of their 27 Fall Classic victories?

Like Huggins, Ruppert never married. Late in life he struck up an ambiguous relationship, neither clearly platonic nor conspicuously romantic, with a young woman named Helen Weyant, to whom he left a third of his estate. They had become friends in 1925, when he was 57. She was 23. "The mystery lady," Steinberg and Spatz call her. She has about her something of an aura.

[Send a letter to the editor.](#)

VIEW COMMENTS
