

The battle for fairness in America

The life of A. Bartlett Giamatti, a former Yale president, commissioner of baseball

by **Ciro De Falco**

The immigrant story generally begins with challenges facing the newcomers. These take different forms: some are outright discrimination based on race, ethnicity and religion, and others are more subtle – such as a belief that some groups just don't fit in.

Fearless and the Battle for Fairness in America considers the life of A. Bartlett Giamatti, a third-generation Italian American, who became the first non-Anglo-Saxon President of Yale University at the age of thirty seven. Author Neil Thomas Proto describes how the Giamatti family persisted against the forces of discrimination, both open and embedded, by sticking to the values of hard work, fairness, and civic duty which they brought with them from Italy.

The Giamatti family immigrated to the United States between 1896 and the 1920s. The family came from the historical town of San Lorenzello, located in the Campania region not far from Naples, which was the seat of the Bourbon dynasty that had controlled the southern half of the country before Italian unification in 1860.

People in this area saw unification more as an occupation. Many lost their jobs and felt the northerners treated them unfairly. The occupiers were merciless against the protesters, treating them as common criminals, even though their opposition may have been “political.” This condition led many, including the Giamattis, to emigrate. Beginning around 1900, emigration from the south of Italy for the first time surpassed that from the north. The author argues that this new wave should be considered as “emigres” rather than emigrants.

The first half of the book is about Valentine (Val) Giamatti, Bart's father, and about Yale University. Early in the 20th century, Yale University had a highly restricted acceptance policy. It saw itself as the institution whose main role was to train the future leaders of the country. It had rigorous and restrictive acceptance requirements. Its undergraduate students had to be male, Protestant and preferably from a certain cohort of society.

The university, along with other top institutions, was part of the eugenics movement in the United States in the early 20th century. The “science” of eugenics maintained that humans evolved through

hereditary genes and are not affected by the environment or learning. Until this belief was discredited around the middle of the century, it restricted “minorities” from having access to top schools. Eugenics also drove U.S. immigration policies of the early 1900s aimed at limiting the entry of Southern Italians and Eastern European Jews.

his father, Bart attended Yale University, receiving both a B.A. and Ph.D. He taught briefly at Princeton University but spent most of his academic life at Yale.

He was a brilliant teacher and prolific author who made considerable contributions to the field of Renaissance literature.

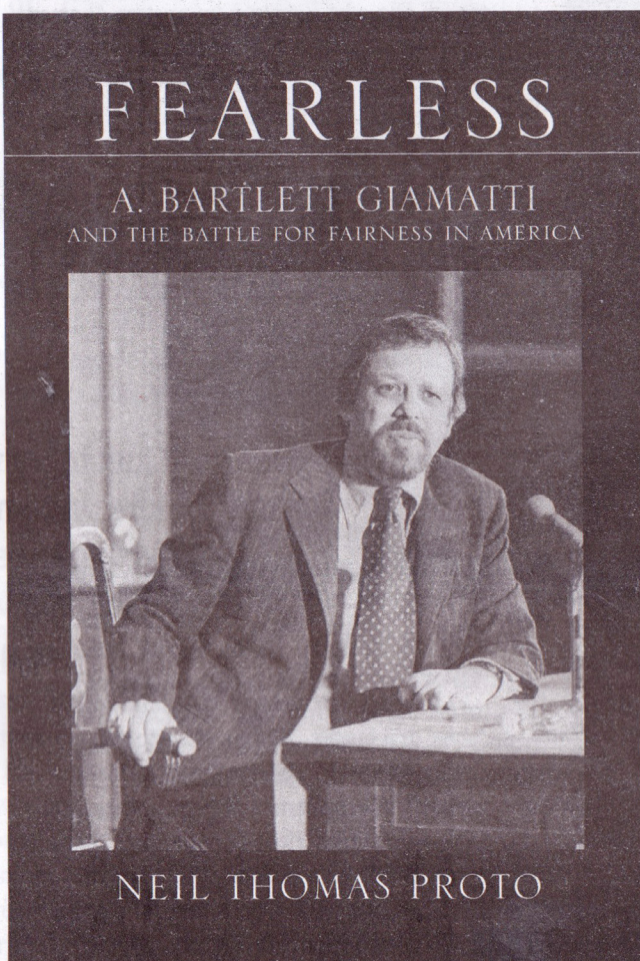
He served as President of Yale from

Cincinnati player Pete Rose, who had been accused of betting on baseball games. This was prohibited by the rules of the League. Rose denied the allegation and fought Giamatti in court. Rose was supported by those with financial interests in the sport who wanted the scandal to just go away. Giamatti was able to negotiate a solution

that protected the integrity of the game. To this day, despite his repeated efforts, Rose has failed to make it into Baseball's Hall of Fame.

Proto maintains that he was hindered from presenting a more in-depth biography of Bart Giamatti since Yale has yet to release his presidential papers. Nevertheless, the book conveys Giamatti's broad intellectual abilities, his negotiating skills and his “... ethical convictions, including his insistence on fairness, his respect for duty of responsible citizenship and his advocacy for people on the margins.” Giamatti traced these attributes to his Italian heritage.

Giamatti died in September 1989, at age 51. Historian Sean Wilentz wrote that Bart Giamatti was a phenomenon who lived the lives of several men, though his own ended



At left, A. Bartlett Giamatti. Above, the book's author Neil Thomas Proto, an attorney, teacher, lecturer and author. He has taught at Yale University and was adjunct professor at Georgetown University's McCourt School of Public Policy. He is a Fellow in the Royal Geographical Society of London. He has written numerous articles and three books: *To a High Court*, *The Rights of My People*, and now, *Fearless*. In the past, he has also written for *Voce Italiana*. Born in New Haven, Connecticut, Mr. Proto is the son of Matthew and Celeste Proto; Celeste emigrated from Italy in 1916.

Val Giamatti was an outstanding student at New Haven High School and was the recipient of a John Sterling scholarship (Yale 1864). The scholarship was designed to benefit students from the New Haven area, regardless of class, ancestry, or family connection. Val was thus able to bypass the school's otherwise restrictive policies. He entered Yale in 1928 as a “commuter” student, which meant he had little opportunity to take part in and be influenced by the campus environment. He excelled at Yale, got his Ph.D from Harvard and became a noted Renaissance scholar and professor. For years he taught at Mount Holyoke College.

The second part of the book focuses on A. Bartlett Giamatti's career. Bart was one of three children of Val and Mary Claybaugh Walton, who came from a well-established New England family. Like

1978 to 1986. He was the youngest president of the university in its history and the first non-Anglo-Saxon. As president, he achieved what his nomination was designed to accomplish: to change the school's image and policy from a place for the privileged to one where academic excellence ruled. This was no easy task. There were entrenched interests to overcome. Despite his many qualifications, he was still seen as an “outsider.”

A lover of baseball, Giamatti also wrote a number of books about the role of the sport in American life. In 1986, he was made President of the National League and in early 1989 he became commissioner of baseball.

During his tenure as baseball commissioner, he was faced with the difficult problem of deciding on the fate of

tragically early.

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