Sports Illustrated

A MAN IN COMMAND

Commissioner Fay Vincent was an unknown until baseball was rocked by the quake

By Steve Wulf

October 30, 1989

Fay Vincent knows very well that baseball can aid the healing process. When he was a freshman at Williams College in 1956, he was locked in his room as a prank, and when he tried to crawl along an icy ledge to get to the next room, he fell four stories. Two vertebrae in his back were smashed, and his legs were temporarily paralyzed. In the year of recuperation that followed, Vincent says he saw almost every New York Yankee game on television. "I remember vividly when Gil McDougald hit Herb Score with that line drive," he says. "I saw the games on Channel 11 in New Haven. Mel Allen and Red Barber. Ballantine blasts and White Owl cigars.

"The Yankees played a role in my recovery, and I hope that the World Series will help this community get over its major trauma."

Vincent was speaking in a private interview last Thursday, two days after a major earthquake devastated the San Francisco Bay Area just before Game 3 of the World Series between the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants, and a day after he announced the postponement of the "Battle of the Bay" Series for at least a week. In the crowded candlelight press conference he conducted Wednesday evening in the St. Francis hotel, Vincent had said, "It is becoming very clear to all of us in Major League Baseball that our concerns—despite this rather large gathering—our issue is really a modest one in light of the great tragedy that hit this area."

In his first major test as baseball's commissioner—and in one of the most difficult situations any commissioner has ever faced—Francis T. Vincent Jr. showed intelligence, compassion and wit. He displayed a remarkable sense of perspective as well as the ability to listen and communicate. If there was a silver lining for baseball last week, it was in the emergence of Vincent, the man who had to replace his friend A. Bartlett Giamatti, who died last month of a heart attack. Baseball is once again in very good hands.

The eighth commissioner was largely unknown as of 5:04 p.m. PDT Oct. 17, when the earthquake hit Candlestick Park. As a result of his college accident, Vincent has a painful arthritic condition in both legs, so he must walk with a cane. (Last spring, when SI asked Pete Rose who else had attended his meeting with Giamatti, Rose referred to Vincent as "the crippled guy.") When the quake began, Vincent was standing up in his field box, talking with a companion. "My balance is not the best to begin with, so I had to grab hold of the railing. At first I thought it was a flyover by jets, but then my wife [Valerie] said, 'This is an earthquake.' I had never been in one, so I had no way to judge its severity, especially after I heard the cheering and exultation from the crowd. As the reports came in, though, it became quickly apparent that for the safety of our 62,000 guests the game had to be called and the stadium cleared. The people can't get enough credit for the orderly fashion in which they left the park, especially in light of the panic seen at sporting events in other countries. They will serve in the future as the model of fan behavior."

The next morning at nine, in the Elizabethan Room of the St. Francis, Vincent met with officials from the two clubs, Commander Isaiah Nelson of the San Francisco police and representatives from ABC, which was televising the games, and decided only that no game would be played that night. "I learned a long time ago that if you don't have to decide something, don't decide it," he said. Vincent also called another meeting for that afternoon and asked officials from the A's and the Giants to prepare reports on the conditions of their stadiums. At 10 a.m., he held his first news conference to announce that night's postponement.

Besides those officials who had met with Vincent in the morning, the afternoon session was attended by Donald Fehr of the Players Association, a representative from the office of the mayor of San Francisco and by several structural engineers and the two league presidents. By then, Vincent had pretty much decided to delay the Series further, but he did bring up two options for discussion. "I asked if anyone thought the Series should be canceled," he said. "Nobody did. Then I asked if anyone thought the Series should be moved to alternate sites. Again, nobody did. Maybe I cast the questions in such a way to discourage those alternatives, but I think we were all in agreement that the Series should go on after an appropriate period and that it should stay in the Bay Area."

Sandy Alderson, the A's general manager, gave Vincent high marks. "He is a brilliant administrator of meetings," he said. "He gave everyone their say. He obviously has a completely open mind. His judgments are the assimilation of everything he hears and thinks. Yet there's no question as to who is the commissioner." Andy Dolich, the A's vice-president for marketing, was also in attendance. "I really knew nothing about the man before that day, but I came away impressed, not only with his handling of the meeting but also with his feeling of the pulse of the Bay Area. He was absolutely on-line."

Vincent went directly from that meeting to the packed press conference across the hall. He made it abundantly clear that 1) the concerns of the Bay Area were first and foremost; 2) baseball knew its place as a guest; and 3) the postponement until Tuesday was only tentative. He especially did not want the Series putting demands on the area's police departments when they had much more important tasks. "We don't want to be conducting baseball while the hunt for victims is going on and while the community is still in a very serious stage of recovery," he said.

"So from my point of view, it is far better to wait here, recognizing that we support the community's effort. We'll try to be as helpful as we can, and we won't be in the way of that effort." Vincent also announced that five parties involved in the Series—ABC, the Athletics, the Giants, Major League Baseball and the Players Association—would each make significant contributions to the relief effort.

"What really impressed me about the commissioner," said Corey Busch, a Giants vice-president and owner Bob Lurie's right-hand man, "was the way he went immediately from the meeting to the press conference and communicated everything that went on and all the concerns that were expressed." Vincent may not be as oratorically dazzling as Giamatti, but he did show himself to be both nimble and erudite in his press briefings last week.

(On Sunday, Vincent, along with San Francisco mayor Art Agnos, announced that the Series would not resume until Friday evening in Candlestick.)

Vincent's decision to continue the Series was not met with unanimous approval. Several members of the media, most notably Dave Anderson of The New York Times, thought the Series should have been canceled because of the tragedy. (Only one championship series in professional sports has ever been canceled, and that was the 1919 Stanley Cup between the Montreal Canadiens and the Seattle Metropolitans, which was called off at 2-2-1 because of an influenza epidemic.) But the vast majority of Bay Area residents wanted the Series to continue; they had lost enough as it was. Later in the week, Vincent, riding in the hotel elevator, met a man who had lost his home in the hard-hit Marina district of San Francisco. Vincent asked him if baseball had made the right decision, and the man said, "Absolutely."

Vincent, an avid student of history, found a historical precedent for his decision. "We can look to the British during the Second World War," he later said. "Diversion was part of the healing process there. They continued to go to their movies even though London was being bombed. They affirmed life, and perhaps baseball can do the same."

The 51-year-old Vincent has always been a passionate baseball fan, and he was loath to deny fans any of their cherished World Series memories. "I can remember the Yankees being in the Series in '47 and '49," he says. "I remember Whitey Ford, the rookie, beating the Whiz Kids for a sweep of the Series in '50. Johnny Podres being so dominant in '55, when the Dodgers beat the Yankees. Bill Mazeroski's big homer in the seventh game in 1960. My father was a great Athletics fan, back when they played in Philadelphia, so I recall their great teams of the early '70s."

Vincent grew up in a sports-minded household. His father, Francis Sr., one of Yale's finest football and baseball players, was an NFL field official until 1944. Before his accident, Fay himself was something of an athlete in the same sports as his father. Since then, he has never considered himself handicapped. "I've always made a living doing things cerebral," he once said. After graduating from Williams, Vincent received a law degree from Yale. As an attorney in both New York and Washington, D.C., he specialized in corporate banking and securities law, and in 1977 he served with the Securities and Exchange Commission as associate director of its division of corporation finance.

Vincent's decision to temporarily postpone the Series was hardly his first big one. From 1978 to 1987 he was the president and CEO of Columbia Pictures. In 1979, he made the decision to fight the hostile takeover attempt by financier Kirk Kerkorian. During his tenure, Columbia produced such financially successful pictures as Kramer vs. Kramer and Tootsie. "Ishtar, too," Vincent once confessed.

In 1988, nine months after Vincent was moved out of Columbia's entertainment division, he resigned to go into private law practice. That's when an old friend—Giamatti—called to ask him if he would negotiate his contract as commissioner. Giamatti created the post of deputy commissioner with Vincent in mind, and during Giamatti's six-month tenure the two friends worked hand in hand on both the new TV contracts and the Rose affair. When Vincent was elected to succeed Giamatti, he said, "Bart's agenda is my agenda," and, indeed, Vincent shares Giamatti's distaste for artificial turf and the designated hitter. When he was making his decision last week, did Vincent think about what Giamatti would have done? "To be honest, the thought never crossed my mind," he said. "But I think he would have done the same thing."

It's ironic that for years Peter Ueberroth made a point that he had had the toughest baptism of any commissioner: the umpires' strike that was resolved just prior to the '84 Series. But then Giamatti was welcomed into office by the Rose scandal, and now Vincent has the first Series postponed on account of an earthquake.

In the next few months Vincent will face another daunting event, the end of the current collective bargaining agreement between the players and the owners. In the past, baseball's labor skirmishes have seemed like earthquakes. Everybody knows that sooner or later they're going to come, but nobody does anything about them until it's too late. In 1972, there was a lockout in spring training and the season had to be postponed 10 days. In 1981, a third of the season was lost. In 1985, two days of play had to be rescheduled because of a strike.

Nobody knows what 1990 holds in store for baseball, and Vincent must give the appearance of remaining apart from the fray. But the fact that he called on the Players Association for input last week is significant. All in all, he demonstrated the kind of leadership that might avert a man-made disaster.

###