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Ted TURNER

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Ted TURNER

Ten years ago, the CNN founder's bosses gave him the boot. Their loss is the world's gain.

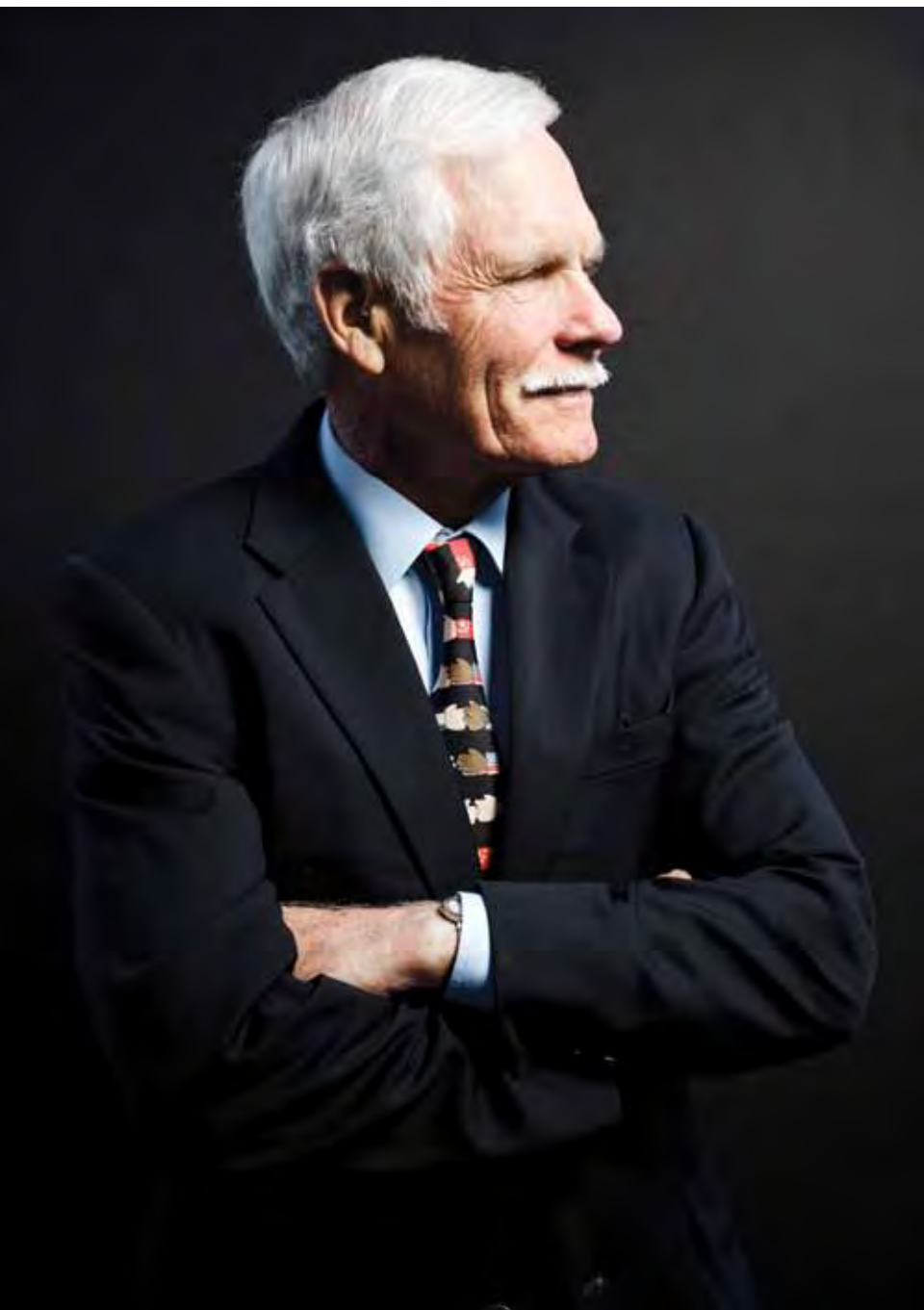
By STEVE FENNESSY



IN THE FORTY YEARS he has been in the public eye, Ted Turner has been called a genius, a jackass (by his father, among others), a visionary, childlike (a compliment), childish (not a compliment), a pioneer, a young maverick, an old lion, a straight shooter, egomaniacal, steadfast, restless, haunted, mercurial, brilliant, impatient, impetuous, insecure, generous, genuine, loyal, and cheap. Also nuts. Definitely nuts. Outside his family, however, he has not, to my knowledge, been described as grandfatherly. The word is presumably a rebuke to somebody like Turner, who has crammed five or six lifetimes into one, who won the America's Cup, who owned the Braves and the Hawks, who launched CNN at forty-one, who founded the Goodwill Games, who once fancied himself a modern-day Alexander the Great, who in 2000 likened a merger with AOL to the first time he had sex, who even today, after three divorces, has four girlfriends, and who logs more hours on his jet in a month than you do on your couch in a year.

Grandfatherly?

Well, see for yourself. Turner spends about a week in Atlanta every month. In the mornings—well, any time of day, really—he can be seen picking up trash around his compact nine-floor office building on Luckie Street in Downtown. People close to Turner often mention this habit of his, and so does Turner himself. “I swear to God,” he told Christiane Amanpour during an interview, when she expressed skepticism that a billionaire would do such a thing. (That Turner is famously agnostic should



not diminish the earnestness of the sentiment.) While a cynic may write it off as a bit of eco-noblesse oblige, Taylor Glover, who manages Turner's vast network of land holdings and business interests, says his boss even collects sandwich bags from passengers on his plane so they can be reused later. Turner may be seventy-two, but he doesn't miss much. At the end of our second conversation, he got up and took a piece of lint off a polished table. "What's this?" he said to his girlfriend, the novelist Elizabeth Dewberry, who explained that she'd found it on her clothes and put it there for the time being.

If you don't see him picking up trash, there's a very good chance you'll catch him at lunch. When he's in Atlanta, Turner eats almost all of his meals at Ted's Montana Grill, the chain he and restaurateur George McKerrow started in 2001. He occasionally goes from table to table, asking his customers if they're happy. There he is, in his blue blazer, a bit stoop-shouldered, top button of his shirt unfastened, tie knotted loosely, straining to hear above the clatter of the kitchen. Solicitous. Relaxed. Patient. *Grandfatherly*.

Don't be fooled.

TED TURNER may have left CNN, but it has not left him. The network's logo is practically the first thing you see when you gaze out his office window Downtown. He used to spend so much time at the network's headquarters, he built a small apartment on the top floor. He'd occasionally be seen walking through the

Turner lost his job thanks to a corporate reshuffling and then saw almost \$8 billion of his net worth evaporate. His friends worried the debacle might also cost him his life.

newsroom in a bathrobe. These days, the only time you'll find him there is once a month, when he makes the five-minute walk past Centennial Olympic Park to get a haircut at Nelda's Hair Salon. The man is loyal.

"If they hoist a white flag, I'll be over there in five minutes," he says with a grin. "At first I thought I'd be recalled pretty quickly, but now twelve years have passed and I'm seventy-two and I've pretty well given up on that." His gripes with CNN haven't changed much: not enough hard news, not enough international news, too many pontificators—although he was pleased with the extensive coverage of the Egyptian revolution.

Turner's grip on his media empire started slipping twenty-five years ago, with his purchase of the MGM film studio and library. To close the \$1.5 billion deal, he was forced to give veto power to some new board members. He lost the studio, ultimately, but kept the film library. The gradual corporatization of Turner Broadcasting, which became part of Time Warner in 1995, made Turner even richer but also made it harder for him to marshal the resources of CNN to authorize programming dear to his heart, specifically concerning subjects such as the environment and overpopulation. Fortunately he had the Turner Foundation, a philanthropic arm he began in 1990 that not only allowed him to give money directly to environmental causes but also strengthened his ties with his five children, who each serve on the board.

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KENNY LEON

KENNY LEON

(b. 1956)

In his eleven years as the Alliance Theatre's artistic director, Leon pushed its subscribers beyond the safe, feel-good fuzzies of *Driving Miss Daisy*—the longest-running play there before he took over in 1990—to multiethnic stagings of bold dramas, comedies, and musicals, including the groundbreaking first run of the Elton John-composed *Aida*. Overall subscriptions may have dropped during that period, but nonwhite subscribers rose from 3 percent to 20 percent, and by his tenure's end, the Clark Atlanta alum had beefed up the Alliance's endowment and brought the theater national prominence. He left the Alliance in 2001 and in 2003 started True Colors Theatre Company to stage plays by minorities of all kinds. His commitment to diversity caught the eye of Broadway, and he began commuting to the Great White Way for his 2004 Tony-winning revival of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Last year the Vinings resident and avid golfer received a Tony Award nomination for best director for his revival of August Wilson's *Fences*, starring Denzel Washington. He's lately moved behind the camera to direct episodes of ABC's *Private Practice*. Next up: directing Halle Berry's Broadway debut in the MLK-themed *The Mountaintop*.

Ted Turner

Continued from page 87

Time Warner's \$164 billion merger with AOL in 2001 turned out to be a disaster, and nobody paid more than Ted Turner. He lost his job, thanks to a corporate reshuffling that unceremoniously put him out to pasture, and then he saw almost \$8 billion of his net worth evaporate as the value of his stock went into a free fall. His friends worried the debacle might also cost him his life. Turner's father shot himself in 1963, when Ted was just twenty-four. It's not something Turner has talked much about. His own son, Rhett, says he didn't learn of his grandfather's suicide until he heard Harry Reasoner mention it in a *60 Minutes* profile of Ted Turner in the 1970s. By then Turner, who majored in classics at Brown and can recite long passages of epic poems, seemed to see his father's death as his own harbinger of doom. "He envisioned himself as part of a tragedy being played out onstage," a Turner Broadcasting executive told *Time* magazine in 1992, when Turner was named Man of the Year.

Turner's professional travails a decade ago were compounded by personal ones: the death of a grandchild and his divorce from Jane Fonda. It was around this time that Glover became president of Turner Enterprises, which, like Turner's Atlanta apartment and his favorite restaurant, is located in the Luckie Street building. "Everything was coming unglued," Glover says. "He was very, very miserable. I was thinking, 'Wow, what did I sign up for?'"

Turner's oldest child, Laura Seydel, believes Ed Turner's suicide was actually a deterrent to her father. "I don't think my dad would be that irresponsible," she says. "Even though he may have thought about it, he would never actually do it, knowing how much pain his father created for him."

Rhett Turner says his grandfather was a cautionary example, that Ed Turner simply did not think big enough. "When he had reached his goals, life had ended for him," Rhett says. "That was what [Ted] learned—to set goals you can't accomplish. That's what he took away from his father committing suicide."

When Jane Fonda left him, she talked about embarking on the third act of her life. In 2001 Ted Turner was sixty-two, single, and jobless. Whether he liked it or not, his own third act had begun.

LAURA SEYDEL makes a compelling argument that when her father lost his job, it was the best thing that could have happened to the world. Now he was free to devote his full mental and physical energies to philanthropy. The amount he's given over the years is staggering: \$1 billion to fund the United Nations Foundation, which has, among its accomplishments, immunized 500 million children, funded World Heritage conservation, and worked toward eradicating polio; \$70 million to fund the Nuclear Threat Initiative, which is headed by Sam Nunn and works to secure nuclear material around the world; and more than \$300 million through his foundation, which has helped seed dozens of environmental initiatives, including the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper. Turner's fortune has also led to the Captain Planet Foundation

er's Vermejo Ranch in New Mexico. Or, for \$4,000, you can hunt a trophy bull bison on Turner's Flying D Ranch in Montana.

Bison in America have seen their once-dwindling population rebound in recent years, thanks in part to ranchers such as Turner, who's been fascinated by the animal ever since he saw his first Buffalo nickel. By 2001 he had a herd of 30,000, except they weren't making him any money. Indeed, they were costing him money, as their expanding numbers were requiring more and more grassland. That same year, McKerrow, whose attorney is Turner's son-in-law, approached Turner with his idea for a chain of restaurants to serve bison. Turner recognized a kindred spirit in McKerrow, the founder of LongHorn Steakhouse, who had been forced out of the chain. Ted's Montana Grill got off to a fast start in the early

Turner's friend Peter Dames set him up with his masseuse for a two-hour session. Turner cut it short at thirty minutes. "He couldn't take it," Dames says. "It was too confining. It's just not in his nature to sit down and enjoy things."

and the Turner Endangered Species Fund.

Turner's ambitions, like his land, are all over the map. But ten years ago, his giving was outpacing his earning. When Glover came aboard, Turner was selling stock to meet his philanthropic obligations and had even borrowed \$250 million to fulfill the terms of his United Nations pledge and pay for his land. Glover recalls telling him early on, "You talk a lot about sustainability. I'm all about financial sustainability."

Glover's first task was, as he describes it, to "diversify the portfolio and create an income stream." Virtually all of Turner's holdings were either land or Time Warner stock. With the land, which encompasses 2 million-plus acres in twelve states (plus Argentina), Glover helped strike a balance that suited both men: Make money off the land while maintaining respect for its natural state. Which today means if you and a friend each have \$12,000, you can go on one of six five-day elk hunts each year at Turn-

er's Vermejo Ranch in New Mexico. Or, for \$4,000, you can hunt a trophy bull bison on Turner's Flying D Ranch in Montana. aughts, opening a new restaurant every four to six weeks. Last year, though, the recession forced McKerrow and Turner to close nine, leaving the chain with forty-six. McKerrow says the plan is to start growing again next year by opening two or three new Ted's. Thanks in part to the growing demand for bison and its skyrocketing price at the grocery store, Turner's bison herds are the most profitable of all of his holdings this year, according to Glover.

There's also Turner Renewable Energy, a for-profit arm of Turner Enterprises that last December flipped the switch on a thirty-megawatt solar energy plant adjacent to Vermejo Ranch. What's most surprising isn't that a Turner project is selling clean energy to 9,000 homes, but that the majority partner in the venture is Southern Company. Ted Turner doing business with Southern Company? He makes no apologies. "I think the electricity producers realize coal's days are numbered," Turner

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says. “We thought it was a good thing financially to do, and it sends a good message that Southern Company is taking a hard look at clean, renewable energy.” Closer to home, Turner has installed fourteen solar panels in the parking lot next to his office, giving cars some shade in the summer while helping to power his building.

“And if I feel like I need something to do, all I have to do is pull out my nuclear weapons file,” Turner says, after pointing the panels out to me. “They have a hundred nuclear weapons targeted at New York, we have a hundred targeted at Moscow. A hundred! One would blow the whole place off the face of the earth. Why a hundred? Why any? Who wants to blow the world up? It’s a nice little world we have here, and most of us get along pretty well.”

In the past ten years, Turner’s philanthropic commitments have gotten a boost from fellow billionaires, including Warren Buffett, a strong financial supporter of the Nuclear Threat Initiative. Turner himself has agreed to continue funding the NTI through at least 2013.

And while Turner’s \$1 billion pledge to the United Nations is almost fully paid off, he’s had to throttle back the ambitions of the Turner Foundation, which is giving away about \$12 million a year, compared to as much as \$75 million some years ago.

Just as Turner used to say he was “cable before cable was cool,” his UN pledge was in many respects groundbreaking, as it put pressure on fellow billionaires to give away more of their fortunes.

I ask Turner what makes him happy. He doesn’t hesitate. “Seeing other people happy.”

PETER DAMES likes to say he knew Ted Turner before he was Ted Turner. Which is to say that their friendship goes back fifty-five years, to when they were both freshmen at Brown and Turner was just the loudmouthed son of an advertising salesman from the South. Dames was the son of immigrants, and both young men had come to Brown from military schools—Dames from the Manlius School in upstate New York, Turner from McCallie in Chattanooga. They couldn’t have been more out of place at Brown. “Here we were at an Ivy League university with all these guys that had gone to Choate and Philips Academy and knew how to dress and knew how to speak and had their clubby old-money

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deals," Dames says. "We were both losers."

Their history together has put Dames in a unique place in Turner's life—the friend who liked him even before he had money. Dames ended up working for Turner for about twenty years, retiring in 1983 as president of Turner Advertising. He splits his time between Atlanta and Big Sur, where last August Turner was best man in Dames's second wedding, as he had been for the first.

Turner—surprise—also has a place in Big Sur, not fifteen minutes from Dames's house, but the two men don't see each other that often. "If it's a quiet year, and nobody's getting married or divorced, I might see him a half dozen times," Dames says. The simple fact is, Turner is never in any one place for long. Dames's joke is that Turner moves more than Yasir Arafat. The restlessness infects all parts of Turner's life. When Turner needed a masseuse in Big Sur, Dames set him up with his. "She gives a two-hour massage. It's wonderful. And I'm talking a massage, not a happy ending. He couldn't take it. It was too confining." Turner cut it short at thirty minutes. "Guys like him can't just sit down on the deck and look at the ocean like I am right now and say, 'Goddamn, it's a nice day.' It's just not in his nature to sit down and enjoy things."

The constant travel became a source of friction in Turner and Fonda's marriage. "He has no belief in permanency and stability," Fonda told *New Yorker* writer Ken Auletta ten years ago, not long after their split. "It's one reason why I'm not with him. Older age is about slowing down and growing vertically, not horizontally. That's not Ted." When Morley Safer asked her three years ago about Turner's constant travel, Fonda said, "When you're chased by demons, you have to keep moving."

I mentioned Fonda's comment to Turner during our first meeting. He seemed slightly annoyed. "I don't think it's demons that are chasing me. Most of the reason I'm moving around is because of this work. I have these properties that I look after. I feel like I'm a custodian, setting an example for sustainable ranching and agriculture, and I have to get around to make sure that's going well. And I like to be outdoors. I like to hike; I like to ride horseback; I like to fish; I like to hunt birds."

By accident or design, then, Turner's vast holdings that stretch all the way to South America, combined with philan-

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{COMPLIMENTS OF THE CHEF}



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thropic passions that involve nothing less than the future of the human race, ensure that at any time, he's bound to be needed somewhere—if not on one of his ranches, then jetting to Congo on United Nations Foundation work (as he will this summer), or speaking at a conference in Las Vegas on sustainable travel (as he will this month), or squeezing in a dinner with his old pal Dames. The man, Dames says, “has to have every moment booked.” And if Ted Turner is to be taken at his word, he is a man at peace—“perfectly happy,” he says. He counts himself a success at all things, save for his marriages. On that score, Dames doubts Turner will marry again, though his four girlfriends may be hoping otherwise.

“Four is the current inventory,” Dames says. “A few have been put on waivers. But they could be called up at any time. Seriously—if there's an opening. He would not go out and find a new one.” (I wanted to talk with Dewberry but was told by Turner's media handler that his companions aren't permitted to speak with the press.)

That other media moguls have outlasted him does not faze Turner. Rupert Murdoch—eighty years old, the owner of Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal*, the man Turner detested so much that at one point he (jokingly) threatened to shoot him—is at the peak of his influence. Murdoch held on to his company, but Turner couldn't hold on to his. You think it bothers him?

“No!” Turner says. “No, it doesn't bother me. He's a smart guy, and he's done very well. We went different routes. I'm not willing to say he beat me in the game of life. He might have beaten me financially. But he certainly didn't beat me in philanthropy. It depends on how you evaluate the situation.”

Turner only subtly pokes at Fox News, Murdoch's cable news channel that consistently trounces CNN in the ratings. “Just because it's gotten good ratings doesn't mean it's more successful,” he says. “It may be more successful financially. But in journalism there are a lot of considerations other than just money.”

Such as?

“Responsibility. For a lot of us, the news media is responsible for how we think and what we think. Irresponsibly run, the media can be very profitable.”

Even a title of Turner's that seemed secure—biggest private landowner in the country—has been lost, and this one to a

close friend, John Malone, the head of Liberty Media (which now owns the Braves, incidentally), thanks to Malone's purchase of a million forested acres in Maine.

"I could still buy a little piece here and there," Turner says, "but my heavy purchasing days of real estate are over." One "little piece" he bought recently was an 8,800-acre plantation in South Georgia from Tom Cousins. The two men have known each other for decades; at one point their backyards butted up against each other, and Cousins's wife even taught Sunday school to Turner's children. When I told Cousins that I was a bit skeptical when Turner said he was fine with no longer being the biggest landowner in America, Cousins chuckled. "I could say something," he said, "but I probably shouldn't."

TED TURNER does not like sitting for pictures. But he does like being on the cover of magazines. He likes attention. Call it vanity. Reassurance. Validation. So he will permit five minutes. "Five minutes, okay?" he'll say. I included a question mark there, but it occurs to me that it could be misconstrued,

like he's asking for permission or something. Let's be clear: It's declarative. The way you might say "Okay?" when you're telling a waiter how you want your burger cooked.

He gave us four and a half minutes.

Afterward, we sat for our second conversation. He said he was thinking of moving his legal residency back to Georgia (he moved it to Florida eight years ago for tax reasons). We talked about religion, and he said he'd intended to be a missionary—until his only sibling, Mary Jean, got sick with lupus. It led to encephalitis, which left her brain damaged.

"It shook my faith," he said, "particularly since I prayed a lot and she had not done anything wrong at all and she suffered so badly. We were taught that God was all-powerful and all-loving, that God was love. It was hard for me to rationalize how he could let her suffer, because she'd lost her mind, too. She used to say, 'God, I'm in so much pain; please let me die.' It took five years, and finally he let her die. I was not happy about it. I didn't feel like it was warranted.

"I'm not angry. I just questioned whether we were right, that God was so powerful. Maybe we gave him a little more power than

he deserved. Maybe he's a little more like us than we like to think. I mean, he created us. We're the ones with the jealousy and the coveting. Far as I know, God never committed adultery. But a lot of us do." He smiled. "Right? Even presidents."

I asked him if he'd had any epiphanies about getting older.

"It beats dyin'. That's about all it beats, though. Better to be old than dead."

I asked where he wants to be buried.

"I'm going to be cremated, and my ashes are going to be spread over my properties."

All the properties?

He laughed. "They're going to have to put it in a salt shaker! It doesn't matter how many ashes get poured on any one place." He laughed again.

"Hey," he said, "did the picture come out okay?"

I explained that photographers generally like to have a little more time.

"Well," he said, "everybody wants more time."

A few hours later, though, he came back to sit again for more photos. After all, he wanted to make us happy. ■



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