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Robert Altman, Video Game Mogul Who Survived Scandal, Dies at 73

He and his mentor, Clark Clifford, were caught up in a major financial fraud case. He later switched careers to lead the prominent game company ZeniMax.

**By Sam Roberts**

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Robert A. Altman, a consummate Washington insider who survived a global banking scandal to reanimate himself as the mogul of a multibillion-dollar video game conglomerate, died on Feb. 3 in Baltimore. He was 73.

The cause was complications of a medical procedure, said his son, James, an executive of ZeniMax, which his father sold to Microsoft last year for \$7.5 billion.

Mr. Altman's company was a household name among gamers who enjoyed the apocalyptic challenges of Fallout, The Elder Scrolls, Doom and Rage. He was probably most widely known as the husband of Lynda Carter, who starred in the 1970s television series "Wonder Woman."

But among the cognoscenti, he was known as the agile defense lawyer who kept prominent political figures out of prison, and as the junior law partner of Clark M. Clifford, among the last of Washington's 20th-century "wise men," with whom Mr. Altman became embroiled in accusations surrounding what was then the largest financial fraud in history.

Mr. Altman was a law school prodigy when he joined Mr. Clifford's firm and, having grasped the complexities of the Nixon administration's wage and price controls, attracted major corporate clients.

He also represented Bert Lance, who resigned as President Jimmy Carter's budget director because of questions about his personal finances (he was acquitted by a jury and later cleared of conspiracy and banking charges), and Jim Wright, the Texas Democrat who quit as speaker of the House of Representatives during an ethics investigation.

Mr. Altman and Mr. Clifford also represented the Bank of Credit and Commerce International in the United States. In 1992, they were charged with helping foreign investors who were secret surrogates for the bank to illegally acquire First American Bankshares of Washington, and with lying to federal regulators when they insisted that the American bank holding company would not be controlled by B.C.C.I.

Mr. Altman became First American's president, Mr. Clifford its chairman.

In 1993, insisting he was innocent and refusing a plea bargain, Mr. Altman went to trial. He was acquitted in State Supreme Court in Manhattan of charges including bribery and deceiving the government.

The jury concluded that he had not deliberately concealed the bank's actual ownership or misled

federal regulators.

The criminal charges against Mr. Clifford were eventually dropped because of his poor health — he was nearly twice Mr. Altman's age, and he died in 1998 at 91. But the repercussions of the charges first lodged by the Manhattan district attorney, Robert M. Morgenthau, coupled with federal complaints and civil suits, would consume both men for years.

Without admitting any guilt, and wishing to put the ordeal behind them, they settled with the Federal Reserve Bank for \$5 million eight months before Mr. Clifford's death.

After Mr. Altman's lawyer, Gustave Newman, punctured the prosecution's case before a jury that had heard 45 witnesses and was glassy-eyed from 15,000 pages of transcripts, Mr. Altman declared: "This was a case that never should have been tried. The government put on a five-month trial and we put on a five-minute defense."

Robert Alan Altman was born on Feb. 23, 1947, in Washington to Norman S. Altman, a lawyer for the federal government during the New Deal, and Sophie (Robinson) Altman, a Yale Law School graduate and local television producer who developed the concept and format for the high school quiz show "It's Academic" — which began in 1961, entered the Guinness Book of Records in 2003 as the world's longest-running quiz show, and is still going.

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin in 1968, Mr. Altman earned a law degree in 1971 from George Washington University, where, as a third-year law student, he was recommended as a summer intern to Clifford & Warnke.

He joined the firm after graduation. Mr. Clifford, a former poker-playing pal of Winston Churchill and later the secretary of defense under President Lyndon B. Johnson, became his mentor.



Mr. Altman and his wife, the actress Lynda Carter, flanked by their children, Jessica and James, at the unveiling of Ms. Carter's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 2018. Robyn Beck/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

where she was a spokeswoman for the cosmetics company. They married in 1984 in an elaborate ceremony in the Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles and nestled in the 1990s in a 20,000-square-foot house (nearly half the size of a football field) in Potomac, Md.

In addition to Ms. Carter and their son, Mr. Altman's survivors include a daughter, Jessica Carter Altman, a singer and lawyer; and two sisters, Susan and Nancy Altman.

After abandoning banking and the law, Mr. Altman incorporated ZeniMax, based in Rockville, Md., in 1999, and then partnered with a software developer, Christopher Weaver, of Bethesda Softworks, until they had a falling-out.

As Bethesda's parent company, ZeniMax gobbled up other brands. When concern was expressed about violent video games, he packed the company's advisory board with political luminaries, including Robert Trump, the former president's younger brother, and Terry McAuliffe, the former Democratic national chairman.

For a man whose whole professional life had been about one-upmanship, Mr. Altman's successful shift in careers might not have been as precipitous as it appeared. James Altman quoted ZeniMax's general counsel, Grif Leshner, as saying that his father was so confident of his own creativity that he wouldn't hesitate to rewrite Shakespeare because he insisted "it can be improved."

Devoting nearly a decade to defending himself drained Mr. Altman of further ambitions in banking, corporate law or capital power politics.

"Until it is your picture on the front page of The Washington Post, until charges are being leveled at you and lots of false accusations are being made, it's very hard to appreciate what it is like," he said in a television interview with Charlie Rose in 1993.

No wonder that when he switched careers, one of the video games his company developed, Fallout 3, invited players on a 23rd-century adventure in the ruins of post-cataclysmic Washington. His favorite, though, his son said, was The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, which offers players the opportunity to "live another life, in another world" and to "play any type of character you can imagine."