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Sumner Redstone, Towering Media Mogul Who Helped Shape Modern Entertainment Industry, Dies at 97

Boston-bred executive built an industry giant with the acquisitions of Viacom, Paramount Pictures and CBS Corp.

By Cynthia Littleton

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Suzanne Plunkett/AP/REX/Shutters

Sumner Redstone, a towering figure in media who built his father’s drive-in theater business into an empire that included Viacom, [Paramount Pictures](#) and CBS Corp., only to see his legacy tarnished in his final years by corporate battles and sordid allegations by former girlfriends, died Aug. 11 at his home in Los Angeles. He was 97.

National Amusements, the Redstone family’s private holding company that controls what is now [ViacomCBS](#), confirmed that Redstone died Tuesday afternoon. After years of public battles with family



“My father led an extraordinary life that not only shaped entertainment as we know it today, but created an incredible family legacy,” Shari Redstone told *Variety* in a statement. “Through it all, we shared a great love for one another and he was a wonderful father, grandfather and great-grandfather. I am so proud to be his daughter and I will miss him always.”

National Amusements noted Sumner Redstone’s role in shaping the modern media landscape with his early career in the exhibition business, followed by his acquisitions of Viacom, Paramount Pictures and CBS Corp.

“Sumner was a man of unrivaled passion and perseverance, who devoted his life to his belief in the power of content,” National Amusements said. “With his passing, the media industry he loved so dearly loses one of its great champions. Sumner, a loving father, grandfather and great-grandfather, will be greatly missed by his family who take comfort knowing that his legacy will live on for generations to come.”

The question of Sumner Redstone’s legacy is much clearer than it would have been just a few years ago when Shari Redstone was embroiled in legal battles with some of her father’s longtime business associates over control of his business interests. Upon his death, Sumner Redstone’s assets will formally be taken over by the Redstone family trust that will manage his controlling stake in ViacomCBS. Shari Redstone and other family members are among the trustees.

The Boston-bred mogul who ruled his businesses with an iron fist was forced to step down as chairman of CBS and Viacom in early February 2016 amid pressure from shareholders and activists questioning his mental capacity. Redstone famously vowed he would live forever, so he wouldn’t bother picking his successor.

A drawn-out legal battle for control of Viacom pitted his daughter, Shari Redstone, against his one-time protege, Philippe Dauman, with former girlfriends Manuela Herzer and Sydney Holland in key supporting roles. In keeping with her father’s tenacious example, Shari Redstone prevailed in what at times became down-and-dirty brawls with her father’s former mistresses, Dauman and former CBS chief Leslie Moonves.

As late as October 2015, Sumner Redstone was said to be demanding a daily diet of steak and sex, according to court documents filed by Herzer. He indulged those appetites despite mostly being bedridden, fed through a tube, surrounded by around-the-clock caretakers and unable to speak intelligibly because of a severe speech impediment. He was a shadow of the powerhouse who once out-dueled fellow-magnates Barry Diller and John Malone to take control of Paramount Pictures.

Redstone was among the last of a breed, a strong-willed in the mold of William Randolph Hearst and William Paley, who may be remembered as much for the battles he fought as for the successes he achieved in the entertainment business. He amassed some of the best-known holdings in the industry, including CBS, Paramount Pictures, MTV, VH1, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, BET and Showtime. He was credited with coining the phrase “content is king,” a mantra borrowed by many other media executives.



by fellow moguls such as Rupert Murdoch and Ted Turner for his willingness to bet big on mergers and acquisitions and to speak his mind. He was feared by many who passed through Viacom's doors as a demanding boss who paid slavish attention to the company's stock price. And he had an appetite for the high life, particularly as it related to female companions.

Redstone was a prominent exhibitor who had been a pioneer of the multiplex concept for movie theaters in the 1960s. He bought and sold at a profit stakes in 20th Century Fox, MGM/United Artists and Columbia Pictures before he set his sights on building his own studio empire.

Redstone became a well-known figure in Hollywood with his 1987 acquisition of Viacom in a leveraged buyout valued at \$3 billion. Six years later he waged a hard-fought war to land Paramount Pictures for \$10 billion, and in 1999 he clinched a deal with Westinghouse to take over CBS. That deal put CBS and Viacom under the same corporate roof — until Redstone decided that Viacom's stock was undervalued. He split up them back into separate entities in 2006.

Redstone was a fighter by nature, and the tally of executives who battled with him, both from inside his companies and elsewhere, is extensive, including Wayne Huizenga, Frank Biondi, Mel Karmazin, Tom Freston, Jonathan Dolgen, Diller and finally Dauman, his longtime lawyer and business consigliere. Redstone famously publicly dropped Tom Cruise from a lucrative deal at Paramount in 2006 because he felt the actor's unusual behavior had hurt the ticket sales for "Mission: Impossible III."

Redstone often had stormy relations with his family, including his brother and his children, Shari and Brent. He successfully bought out his son's share of the family business but failed to get his daughter to do the same despite a \$1 billion offer. His marriage to Phyllis Raphael ended in 1999 after 52 years. In 2003, he wed former schoolteacher Paula Fortunato, but the union was over by 2008.

Redstone's final years were marked by tabloid eruptions about various mistresses and family members, who fell in and out of favor at Redstone's expansive home in the gated Beverly Park enclave in the hills above Los Angeles. Long-time companion Herzer and some-time girlfriend Holland reportedly received \$150 million in cash and assets over a five-year period. Redstone spurned both in 2015 and his lawyers vowed the following year to go to court to attempt to recover the gifts.

Herzer's lawsuit, filed in November 2015 became the first in a series of nasty legal challenges that defined Redstone's final days. The Argentina-born socialite lost the case in May 2016 when a Los Angeles judge turned aside her request to be reinstated as the ultimate overseer of Redstone's health care. Herzer and Redstone's attorneys fought it out for another 18 months before Herzer settled in January 2019 by paying Redstone \$3.25 million for gifts the mogul had given her over the years.

Importantly, the Herzer case also cemented the reemergence of daughter Shari Redstone in her father's life. After the court decision, Shari became an even more regular presence. Her camp said the rapprochement was possible because Redstone's greedy and controlling female companions had finally been removed from



The image of the twilight Sumner Redstone — glassy-eyed and unable to express his abundant opinions — marked a sad departure from his younger self. By the mid-1980s, he saw the burgeoning value of cable television and went after Viacom. He invested freely in executive talent and stars — so long as they delivered. And he never ceased to be a cheerleader for the movie business where he got his start.

The depth of Redstone's ambition and drive may be explained by an earlier incident in which he cheated death. In 1979, he was caught in a hotel fire in Boston and was burned on more than 45% of his body as he hung from a window ledge. He wasn't expected to live. But after 60 hours of intense surgeries, Redstone recovered. "I can say with certainty that my will to win, my tenacity, had a lot to do with my recovery," he wrote in his 2001 memoir "A Passion to Win."

Trained as a lawyer, Redstone was fervently litigious throughout his career, especially on antitrust issues, dating back to a landmark lawsuit in 1958 in which his National Amusements theater company accused the major studios of conspiring to avoid offering movies fairly to all exhibitors. In 1981, the company sued Disney's Buena Vista over the practice of blind bidding, in this case, for the movie "The Black Hole"; the studio had required huge sums from theaters upfront, while exhibitors did not know what others were offering. Disney eventually settled, and the practice of blind bidding went away. In 1989, Redstone sued Time Inc. for not affording carriage to Viacom's Showtime on its cable systems, which carried Time's own HBO channel. Redstone eventually prevailed: Showtime was given distribution and Viacom received cash and other benefits.

In the digital era, he personally directed Viacom's strategy to wage copyright infringement war against Google's YouTube when he realized how widely and quickly clips and pirated programs from Viacom channels were popping up on the Internet giant's archive. Viacom's years-long fight helped spur YouTube to make concessions to copyright owners by taking down videos when informed of infringement violations.

For all his years in Hollywood, Redstone never lost his Boston Brahmin accent or his New England toughness. Long after age would dictate that his hair turn gray, Redstone maintained a deep-orange hue atop his head.

Born Sumner Rothstein (the family name was changed when he was 17), he was the son of an immigrant aspiring entrepreneur father who eventually came to own local nightclubs, including the Boston branch of the famous Latin Quarter. His father bought his first drive-in on Long Island in 1934.

Redstone was accepted into the elite Boston Latin School, where he graduated first in his class. He entered Harvard College but left to enlist in the armed forces, where he served in an intelligence unit decoding Japanese messages during World War II. He returned to civilian life and obtained his law degree from Harvard. Redstone managed to shake himself loose of the family's theater business and was a law secretary for the U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington and then a special assistant to the U.S. attorney general. He



But by 1954, Redstone returned to the family fold of what was then New England Drive In Theaters. He tackled the business with characteristic ambition, implementing an expansion plan by buying underlying property to the theaters he had acquired or built. In 1967, he joined the Massachusetts-based exhibitor National Amusements as president. He reorganized the company that grew in the following decade to become one of the 10 largest theater owners in the U.S., with more than 600 locations. The privately held National Amusements remained the holding company for Redstone's controlling stakes in CBS and Viacom, among other investments.

Concerned that exhibition was not growing fast enough, Redstone began investing in media in the early 1980s, scoring profits from his minority stakes in Fox, Columbia MGM/UA and Orion Pictures. He soon became a billionaire and one of Forbes' richest men in the U.S.

But that was not enough.

In 1987, he began his bold takeover of Viacom, which owned the MTV Networks, Nickelodeon, Showtime as well as cable systems, TV and radio stations; the move was seen as an almost foolhardy risk for the New England theater owner. But Redstone prevailed after a protracted six-month battle. He borrowed most of the money for the leveraged buyout. He would later take the company and its debt public, also considered a highly risky move.

Redstone eventually moved to New York to work with Viacom chief Frank Biondi. He turned over the family's theater business to his son-in-law, Ira Korff. After seemingly attempting to buy all of Orion Pictures, he got involved in a battle with Metromedia giant John Kluge. He lost this one but made a handsome profit from his sale of his stock to Kluge. He then claimed he was not interested in Orion, consuming himself with running his new media empire.

But Redstone had long coveted a Hollywood studio and, in 1993, the opportunity arose for him to act on that desire. His \$7.5 billion offer to buy Paramount led to a battle with former Fox and Paramount CEO Barry Diller and his ally, cable mogul John Malone. When it seemed that Redstone had lost to Diller, who had run up his bid to about \$9.5 billion, Redstone bounced back with a \$10 billion bid.

Diller folded, and Redstone had Paramount.

The Paramount bid had driven down the price of Viacom stock from the mid-\$60s to the mid-\$30s, jeopardizing a \$1 billion bid for Blockbuster Entertainment. Redstone wanted to make movies at Par, show them on his cable channels and rent them out at Blockbuster. He also managed to buy Blockbuster. But a decade later, in 2004, Viacom spun off the business and took a \$1.3 billion writedown on the value of the video chain.

The most transformative deal of Redstone's career, though, was his acquisition in 2000 of CBS from its parent Westinghouse. It was at the height of the era of the large media conglomerate. That same year, AOL



eyes of Wall Street. At the same time, Redstone's relationship with CBS topper Mel Karmazin, who became Viacom president, continued to deteriorate until Karmazin resigned in June 2004. Leslie Moonves, the executive who spearheaded the revival of the Eye network in the previous decade, was handed the reins following Karmazin's departure.

In 2005, Redstone made the decision to split apart his media company and to serve as chairman of the two separate entities, both controlled by National Amusements. Redstone anticipated the de-consolidation trend in media that would later be followed by Time Warner and Cablevision Systems, among others. His hope was that the stock price of both CBS and Viacom would benefit by allowing investors to more tightly focus on broadcast or cable assets.

After the split, Moonves remained CEO of CBS while former MTV Networks chief Tom Freston became CEO of Viacom. A year later, Redstone shocked the industry when he abruptly fired Freston for what many believed was Redstone's frustration over Viacom's failure to win social networking site MySpace. In retrospect, it's clear that Viacom dodged a bullet as News Corp. bought MySpace for \$580 million in 2005 and sold it in 2011 for \$35 million. In Freston's place, Redstone placed his longtime lawyer, Dauman.

The issue of succession was not one Redstone ever addressed in public. The frequency of the question as his years advanced spurred his famous vow to "live forever." The picture was further muddied when he had a falling out with his daughter, Shari, who served as president of National Amusements and whom many figured would take over for her father. But Redstone's grip on CBS and Viacom — he controlled nearly 80% of the voting shares in each — allowed him to wave off pressure from investors to detail a specific plan following his death.

As part of his divorce settlement with his first wife, Phyllis, it was disclosed that all of Redstone's stock would be left to his grandchildren. The Redstone Family Trust will inherit National Amusements assets and be run on behalf of the grandchildren by a group of seven trustees, a list that includes Shari Redstone.

Amid the legal battles Herzer, Holland and Dauman, Shari Redstone began to exert more influence as Viacom's fortunes declined. She brought new board members into Viacom and was instrumental in selecting former Viacom International Media Networks chief Robert Bakish as president and CEO in December 2016. Shari Redstone told friends and colleagues how important Viacom was to her father and how much she wanted to see it restored to health.

After years of on-again, off-again negotiations, Shari Redstone succeeded in bringing Viacom and CBS Corp. back together in a merger completed in December 2019, led by Bakish.

A longtime philanthropist, Redstone gave generously throughout his career to causes ranging from burn recovery research to the Cambodian Children's Fund to Autism Speaks. He consistently made Forbes' magazine list of the wealthiest people in the world. In 2012, Paramount renamed its Administration Building the Sumner Redstone Building in a dedication ceremony.

and, indeed, suggest new ideas and new agendas when the assumption is I will hold on to the old ones like a bulldog I still want to be No. 1.”

James Rainey and Tom Lowry contributed to this report.

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