BLOCK & Tackle

An Inside Look at How Hollywood REALLY Works.

Secrets Behind The Hollywood Oscar Party Changing Of The Guard

THE UNTOLD STORY: When Norby Walters suddenly cancelled the 'Night Of 100 Stars' after nearly three decades, Roger Neal was there to fill the void for those who wanted to rub elbows with legendary stars of movies and TV

NORBY WALTERS MAKES HIS EXIT

For the past 27 years, if you were willing to shell out $1,000 a ticket, you could watch the Oscar telecast at Norby Walters *Night Of 100 Stars*, a black-tie dinner in a Beverly Hills hotel ballroom where guests rubbed elbows with classic stars. Over the years, these stars included Billy Bob Thornton, Melanie Griffith, Jon Voight, Richard Dreyfuss, Bryan Cranston, James Woods, Cloris Leachman, Bruce Davison, Lou Diamond Phillips and many others.

Norby Walters and Jon Voight (Mickey Donovan on Showtime's *Ray Donovan)*

NORBY'S BIG SURPRISE

In December, however, Walters shocked the stars, his pals, and even his longtime publicist Ed Lozzi, when he announced an abrupt end to his annual event.

"I have macular degeneration," said Walters, "so it's hard for me when I'm across the room or even up close to have facial recognition."

Why didn't he sell the event or turn it over to his sons or friends? "Every actor wants to come and hang out with me," he answered. "It's personal with every one of those actors."

"I'm just tired," he added. "So I've come to the end of the trail. That's all."

While his medical problems were the final trigger, they weren't the only one, as you will read here for the first time. This **exclusive behind the scenes account will reveal the real reasons** Walters pulled the plug on his famous Oscar party.

This is the untold story of a legendary, often controversial event, its colorful promoter and sudden end, and how a little-known Hollywood publicist/manager/producer who started his party out of revenge is now expanding with ambitious plans to grow his Oscar night empire even more in the coming years.

The driving force behind that Academy Awards party, launched three years ago, is the title presenter of the *Roger Neal Style Hollywood Oscar Viewing Black Tie Dinner Gala.*

Neal says his party grew out of his annual gifting suite where for 22 years he brought in sponsors to give the star's fashions, jewelry, trips, art and more in return for promotion.

Neal says this year, each star guest will get a bag of gifts valued at $23,000, including trips to the Bahamas and a castle in Ireland.

Neal is now positioned to inherit many of Walters' stars, sponsors and ticket buyers - but there is no official hand-off. There was no love lost in recent years between the two promoters.

Neal complained to Block & Tackle.biz two years ago that stars he invited were told if they went to his party, they would no longer be welcome at Walters better known, higher profile, more star-studded party.

Walters insists it "didn't mean a thing to him." His only complaint was that some stars double booked both events – because they wanted to attend Neal's gifting suite - and then left him with empty chairs when they got caught in traffic between parties.

Neal admits Walters edict was a problem for him, but he wants to be diplomatic. "I would never say to anybody, 'Hey, if you go to Norby's don't come back to mine," said Neal, adding. "We do our dinner for the right reasons and welcome all the stars that went to Norby's."

Walters may have retired but he has not encouraged anyone to go to Neal's event. Walters has even retained rights to the name *Night Of 100 Stars,* which he is looking to sell for $50,000 or more.

Before you call Walters and start your own party, a little perspective.

CONTEMPORARY OSCAR PARTY HISTORY

Beginning in the 1960s, for nearly three decades, THE Oscar party not attached to the actual ceremony was put on for about 150 stars by super-agent Paul "Swifty" Lazar, until he died in 1993. A year later Vanity Fair filled that void.

Since then, there has been no question that during and after the Oscars – second only to the movie Academy's official Governor's Ball at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood - the place to find the hottest, most contemporary stars is the Vanity Fair party.

Most of those at the Conde Nast magazine's prestigious private party - the biggest stars, producers, studio heads and other swells - are invited to attend as guests, but a very limited number of tickets do go on sale.

According to the website VIPConcierge.com, Vanity Fair party entry can be purchased for $42,500 per guest, but you must buy in pairs, so the minimum cost is $85,000. (It appears the few available tickets for this year are already sold out).

The other hot ticket if you want to see contemporary stars – especially those in the world of music – is the annual *Elton John Foundation Charity Oscar Viewing Party and After Party.* The few tickets still available to the public go for $6,490 per person; or for the after party alone, $3,999 each.

By comparison, the *Night of 100 Stars* was a bargain - and Roger Neal Style is the same price, $1,000 per ticket.

To make room for more classic stars and guests, Neal is expanding his event from 200 seats last year to 350 this year. About 100 to 150 tickets are available for sale to the public with seating at tables along with stars on one of two floors inside Donelle Dadigan's Hollywood Museum, which is housed in the historic Max Factor building on Highland Ave., a stone's throw from the Kodak Theater, home of the Oscars.

For those who can't afford Vanity Fair or Elton John, or who prefer to see and be seen with stars they have watched in movies and on TV for years, Walters' party was, and Neal's now is, the choice.

About 200 of Neal's seats are reserved for invited guests – mostly the growing list of stars, which this year is expected to include Lou Ferrigno, Robert Forester, Anson Williams, Vivica Fox, Diane Ladd, Penny Marshall, Marla Gibbs, Lainie Kazan and Kelly Lange, among others.

Still, Neal will need a few more years to catch up in terms of stars, profile and importance with Walters, who personally watched over every detail of his event.

GAME ON FOR NORBY WALTERS

He was born Norbert Meyer 85 years ago in Brooklyn, New York, the son of Polish immigrants. His father had a bar and nightclub near their home which Norby and his brother Walter Meyer took over in 1952 and renamed Norby (and) Walter's Bel Air. He took his professional name from that bar and became Norby Walters as he went on to open other bars and restaurants.

A nightclub he owned in Manhattan attracted stars who would migrate from the more famous and upscale Copa Cabana night club next door for late night drinks. After there was a shooting inside Norby Walter's Supper Club it closed down, and he headed to Los Angeles in 1990.

Tough, smart, pushy and often profane, Walters became a music booking agent in Hollywood with clients including Gloria Gaynor, who in 1978 had a big hit with the song, "I Will Survive." Other clients included The Four Tops, The Commodores, Patti LaBelle and Kool and the Gang.

Walters expanded into sports management but was too aggressive in signing clients. He got caught up in a scandal in 1988, and later was accused of associating with the mob and charged with racketeering and more. Walters pled innocent. All charges were later dropped on appeal - but Walters was done being a talent rep.

Not long after Walters got involved with an Oscar party started by comedian Milton Berle's son Bill Berle, Jonathan Michaels and Michael Edward Bass.

Milton Berle in his prime

Although his hit TV show ended after the 1950s. Berle continued to be known as Mr. Television and "Uncle Miltie" to millions, appearing on other shows and in live venues, so he was the initial draw.

IT BEGAN AT THE BEVERLY HILTON AND IS BACK THERE AGAIN THIS YEAR

Lozzi remembers that at the first party which was held at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, Berle took the stage to entertain the crowd.

The second year it was it moved to the Roxbury night club on Sunset Strip, where Berle was again an attraction, and legendary director and producer Stanley Kramer was honored.

In its third year, the party promised Academy Award-winning actor Jack Lemon would present a Humanitarian Award to the Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, but Lemon failed to show and Yeltsin made his appearance via satellite.

Berle (who died in 2002) by then wanted out. The group invested a lot of money in the party but it wasn't going well.

"A guy I knew called and said, 'Norby Walters, you need to help me,'" recalled Walters. "I said 'Why?'"

"He said somebody talked me into paying for an Oscar party and the whole thing is falling apart. I invested $100,000 and it looks like it's going to collapse in about 20 minutes."

This was 10 days before the Oscars.

"So I said, 'What do you want from me?' He said, 'I heard you know a lot of actors.'"

So, Walters became one of the official "presenters" that year along with then-businessman Donald J. Trump and actor Anthony Quinn, for an event at the Beverly Hilton which drew about 1,000 attendees.

Long before he became president, Donald Trump attended the 14th annual Night of 100 Stars in 2004 as a "presenter" accompanied by actress Dominque Swain ("Lolita") and Melania, a year before The Donald and the Slovenian model married.

Walters recruited about half a dozen actor friends he knew from being an agent and his nightclub days, and decided when it was over, "This could be fun. I could make a party."

"So, I decided I would do it," says Walters, who took over the entire event, and recruited about 20 name actors for the following year.

Walters wanted to re-brand the party as well, something to give it some sizzle. When he had been in New York, he had helped the great theatrical producer Alexander H. Cohen when he put on *The Night Of 100 Stars* as a benefit for the Actors Fund featuring scores of Broadway talent

Cohen, who produced over 100 live productions in London and New York during his career, sold it to ABC as a TV special.

Walters loved the name *Night Of 100 Stars* and after Cohen died was surprised when he checked with the copyright and patent offices and found it had never been registered. So, he grabbed it for the cost of the filing fee.

His Academy Awards gala now had a clever name and a concept. And like the New York event, it was in part put on for charity.

The *Night Of 100 Stars* moved to Chasen's Restaurant in Beverly Hills not long before it closed for good, and then to the Century Club, before finding a long-term home at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

FOR 27 YEARS, WALTERS WORKED WITH ONLY ONE PUBLICIST

When he took over the party, Walters inherited Edward Lozzi as his publicist, and they continued together for 27 years.

One of the associates Lozzi brought on in the first years was a young publicist named Roger Neal, who he had known for a decade.

Roger Neal and Ed Lozzi on the job

When Neal later started his own firm, he continued the relationship with Lozzi and Walters by helping find stars to attend, bringing in some sponsors and providing leads on ticket sales.

Lozzi organized international press coverage and a press line that grew to about 300 journalists and media outlets. That included ABC television, the New York Daily News, USA Today, CNN, British papers and local L.A. media.

It also included the Beverly Hills papers and dozens of smaller print and electronic outlets that helped pump up local ticket sales.

In 2004, Walters and the *Night of 100 Stars* was investigated by the state of California for failing to file proper disclosure documents about money it gave to charity, and money that was used to put on the event and pay Walters a fee.

The Film Foundation, run by director Martin Scorsese, with a board that included Steven Spielberg, George Lucas and Robert Redford, among others, had received about $400,000 from the events. When the investigation became public, Scorsese quickly cut all ties to the Night Of 100 Stars.

Walters admitted he did not file all the necessary paperwork with the state but then did so retroactively. After that Walters ended connections to any charity and just put the Oscar party on himself as a business.

In a 2004 article, The Los Angeles Times reported Walters was paid $10,000 for his efforts at the party, with a guest list that year which included Donald and Melania Trump.

Walters insists the event has never made a lot of money. He said he did it because "I was having a lot of fun and it's a grand time."

The L.A. Times reported in 2004 that based on financial statements filed with the city of Beverly Hills in 2000, 90 percent of the guests that year attended for free. Walters gave 400 complimentary tickets to stars and guests, and 80 to the press.

"Just 72 people paid the average ticket price of $650," reported the Times, "yielding a relatively modest $47,000 in (charity) donations."

His party was also a way to draw stars to a weekly by-invitation poker game Walters hosted at his home for fun. The game is continuing even after he ended his party.

For a recent game the list of players included Jason Alexander, Hal Linden, Lou Gossett Jr., John Larroquette, Tony Denison and Chris McDonald.

The dinner has ended but the game goes on.

ECCENTRIC MILLIONAIRE PETER NYGARD JOINS THE PARTY

The rest of the cost each year had to be raised from sponsors. One of the biggest, for many year, was an eccentric, controversial Finnish-Canadian millionaire women's clothing manufacturer and medical experimenter, Peter Nygard.

A self-made business man whose company has annual sales of about $500 million, Nygard's wealth has been estimated at close to $900 million.

It is not his wealth however, that gets him the most attention. It is his flamboyant lifestyle and arrogant attitude.

His primary residence is a 150,000-square-foot estate on Lyford Cay island in the Bahamas, inspired by Mayan architecture.

Although far from what is usually considered handsome, Nygard's power and money assure he is constantly surrounded by beautiful women, usually in sexy clothes.

Although Nygard has only married once briefly in the 1970s, he is the father of seven children with four women, and had a multi-year relationship with the late blonde bombshell, Anna Nicole Smith.

In 2012, Nygard got into a protracted legal battle with a neighbor on Lyford Cay, U.S. hedge fund manager Louis Bacon, over development of his property, his lifestyle and other issues that united some neighbors against him. Legal battles continue through this day.

Besides his fashion empire which reportedly includes some 200 stores in the U.S. and Canada, Nygard invests in medical research, including breast cancer and the use of stem cells to prevent aging and extend life – some say in an effort to keep himself alive forever.

He founded a biotech company with an ultra-modern medical facility in the Bahamas that does research, some of it with stem cells, that would not be allowed in the U.S.

Peter Nygard at the Night of 100 Stars with some of his models

Nygard's deal with Walters over the years included a number of VIP tables at the dinner which sold for about $25,000 each. He came to the *Night Of 100 Stars* most years with a parade of stunningly beautiful, mostly young models representing a rainbow of races and nationalities, usually wearing his unique fashions.

Sources say in recent years Nygard has paid Walters about $150,000 for a sponsorship.

Over the past three years, that covered about half the $250,000 to $300,000 cost of the entire evening at the Beverly Hilton. About $100,000 of that was for the open bar, where each drink cost Walters $20.

Walters says it broke his heart when he had to move the party out of the Beverly Hills Hotel three years ago. "It hurt me," said Walters. "It was easy to sell because everybody loves the Beverly Hills Hotel."

However, after a boycott began against the hotel's owner, the Sultan of Brunei, because of his repression of gay and lesbian people, "I went along," says Walters. "I don't need anybody picketing outside.... I got caught in a box so I went along with it."

The Beverly Hilton was not as intimate or as perfect, Walters felt, but it was the obvious alternative even though he says it "cost a lot more money."

HOW NORBY'S 'NIGHT' SLIGHT LAUNCHED NEAL'S STYLE PARTY AS AN ARCH COMPETITOR

Walters insists the competition from Neal the past three years for stars, sponsors and ticket buyers was not significant.

Others say it didn't have to happen. In fact, it was over a few tickets that the longtime relationship between Walters and Neal imploded.

Lozzi says it started about four years ago when Neal asked Walters for some comp seats to the *Night Of 100 Stars*. For years, Neal had helped bring in stars, and was usually given seats to accompany the stars.

That year Neal did not have any stars to offer. He told Walters "I'd love to come," says a mutual friend, "but it's just Lynn (his wife) and me. You know I've worked with you all these years and I really don't want to go to another party."

"So Norby says, 'Sure, I'll give you a great seats with stars at your table. No problem. That's $1,000 per seat. Will that be credit card or check?"

"Roger was insulted and pissed off and he pretty much told Norby on the spot, 'You know what? I'm going to have my own Oscar party and I'm going after you! That's the way it was."

Neal won't confirm that scenario, but says that for five or six years before he started his dinner, "stars (at his gifting suite) were asking me, 'Hey, why don't you do a dinner?'"

Once Neal launched, the gifting suite was a powerful draw that gave him an advantage. "Stars will go anywhere that they are going to get something for free," said Lozzi.

Neal also served better food, and shared some proceeds with various charities, which Walters would no longer do, adding a charity veneer.

Neal also drew some stars by presenting "icon" awards during the Oscar show commercial breaks.

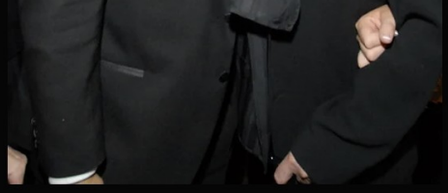
To compete, Walters last year for the first time in decades gave an award to Joe Bologna, who passed away last August. This year Neal is giving an award to his widow, Renee Taylor.

Neal this year will also present Icon awards to "Happy Days" mom Marion Ross, The Pointer Sisters, producer Karen Kramer (widow of director Stanley Kramer) and his client Burt Ward, who played Robin in the 1960's TV version of *Batman*.

Another advantage the dinner gave Neal was that he could use it to boost his own clients' egos and where possible, their careers.

Neal leverages the honorees to attract other stars to attend and present. This year that list is expected to include Jon Voight, Lily Tomlin, Billy Bob Thornton, Charlene Tilton, and songwriter Carol Connors.

The loss of Bologna reminded Walters of how many of his famous friends who could be counted on to come year after year were gone.



Norby Walters with *Some Like It Hot* star Tony Curtis, who died in 2010.

"And it's very hard to replace them," said Walters, "when you lose a Charlie Bronson, a Sid Caesar, a Marty Landau. It's hard to lose Charlie Durning."

NYGARD WANTS MORE FOR HIS MONEY

The last straw came late last year when Nygard demanded more seats, more favors and more of everything to maintain his sponsorship, said sources - all for the same money. That was going to cut into Walters revenue – so he had to find more sponsors just to break even.

"At this late date, you gotta go out and do the hustle," said Walters mournfully. "I don't have the strength to do it. It was just the whole thing, not one thing in particular. It had all been a go (until December) but it just wasn't in the cards."

"The hustle became too hard," he added. "You have to sell the tickets. It isn't like a TV show where (production company) Dick Clark was picking up the whole tab."

"When you're an individual like myself," lamented Walters, "you gotta sell tickets and tables to people. It's a hard hustle. After 27 year's you figure it becomes easy. It never does."

Walters insists he never made big money on the dinner. "It was a grand time," he explained, "but the pressure, the pressure was just too much. So, I said forget about it."

"I had to pull the plug after 27 years. I got a lot of feedback, from actors and civilians. 'How can you do it?!' 'Oh, it's an institution!' I said, 'Yeah, I'll be in the institution soon."

With a laugh, Walters added: "Everybody expresses a lot of remorse but I'm the guy who has to get out there and make it happen. It's just too hard."

On the night of this year's Academy Awards, Walters will be home with Irene, his wife of 45 years. "We'll be in our pajamas," he chuckled, "and have some popcorn and watch the Oscars."

THE GOSPEL OF ROGER NEAL

Roger Neal grew up far from the glitter of Hollywood but even as a kid it represented his dream.

He was born and raised in Norwood, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati, and for less than two years attended the University of Cincinnati.

After he dropped out of college, at age 20, Neal headed to Hollywood to pursue show business.

His first job was in the mailroom at MGM when it was still on the lot in Culver City. He delivered mail to stars like Michael Landon, producers including Aaron Spelling and executives, even studio owner Kirk Kerkorian.

About six months after he arrived, a marketing executive took a liking to Neal and asked what he really wanted to do. "I told her I want to help create stars," he recalled, "and she said I want you to be my guest at a premiere."

She took him to his first movie premiere, for the James Bond movie, "Octopussy."

He couldn't believe he was at a real Hollywood premiere, rubbing elbows with stars. He met people and began being invited to other events.

One night at a L.A. restaurant, he started a conversation with someone who said, "Oh, my brother does what you do."

His brother was Ed Lozzi, who was dong public relations and talent management.

Neal left MGM around 1982 and began working for Lozzi.

Even after he started his own PR and management company, Neal continued working on projects with Lozzi.

Around 1988, Neal repaid the favor by bringing in Lozzi to work with him when he was hired on the advance team for George H.W. Bush, about to be elected president.

Neal had been around the Bush campaign accompanying his client, the late comedian Fred Travalena (who died in 2009. He had been doing shows for Bush, as he had for other politicians in that era, both Democrats and Republicans.

Neal was on the floor of the Astrodome in Houston for an event when he was approached by some of the Bush staff.

"We need a guy in Los Angeles that can get the entertainment media to cover President Bush (senior) when he comes there and get some stars to come out and perform."

Neal worked with Bush for the next four years and when he needed help, brought Lozzi aboard to work with them.

Neal has been a Republican ever since. He has been cited in articles as one of the rare Republicans in Hollywood, although he has never been as active again as he was in the era of George H.W. Bush.

When asked about Donald Trump, Neal says he supports him because "Whoever is in the oval office, whether I like them or not, I support them and think that's how it should be. You don't have to agree with someone's politics. You should respect whoever is in the office."

When Walters got involved with *The Night Of 100 Stars,* Lozzi was already working on it for his client, Milton Berle's son, Bill.

Lozzi recruited Neal to assist him in the early years. Neal's first year was Berle's last.

As his own business grew, Neal was less involved, aside from helping fill seats with stars each year, until the blowup.

Neal's client list for the past 35 years has included Burt Ward, who played Robin on the 1960s TV series Batman, a pop culture phenomenon in its day; actor and cookbook author Paul Sorvino; actress and spokesperson Kelly Lange, and producer Ilya Salkind.

He also manages actors Sheree J. Wilson, who appeared on the original Dallas; and Clarence Gilyard, who was on *Walker Texas Ranger* with Chuck Norris, and Wilson.

For the past two years Neal, has had Wilson and Gilyard touring across the U.S. in *Driving Miss Daisy*, which he produces and books.

ROGER NEAL'S SECRET LIFE

Neal also has a secret life as a Christian minister. He has toured and sings with his family as the Neal Family Ministries, which was most active between 2003 and 2009. He and his wife Lynn (nee Briggs) preach and sing Christian music to raise money for Multiple Sclerosis charities, along with their three children, Chelsea, Roger Jr. and Bianca.

"They were called into ministry, traveling the country, appearing on TV worldwide bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ through song and the word," explains their website. "Lynn would be diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. God healed her and she speaks in the services and concerts today about her healing."

Neal says he keeps his work with the Ministries separate from his show business activities, but he remains a devout Christian.

Lynn is her husband's partner in business as in life, and works on the Oscar gifting suite and party, as do their children - the twins Roger Jr. and Bianca, and Chelsea, along with her fiancé, Nick, who works in security and on Oscar night is part of the security team.

Roger Neal with his wife Lynn at one of the Oscar gifting suite events

For the dinner Lynn designs the classy décor, table settings and lighting, and works in every other area where she can contribute.

To outdo Norby last year, Neal served steak and lobster. At the Night Of 100 Stars the entrée was chicken.

THE OSCAR GIFTING SUITE PAYS DIVIDENDS

Neal started doing his Oscar gifting suite 23 years ago in a hotel, where over a period of five days' movie, TV and music stars came by to browse and get freebies. In return, the stars would usually take a photo with the product and sponsor to be used in advertising and public relations campaigns.

Roger Neal at his 2016 Oscar gifting suite

Over the years Neal cut the gifting suite back to four, three and two years. This year for the first time it will be one day – the day of the dinner.

"It's a lot less work for me," says Neal, "and the designers and sponsors. It just made it all better, and I'm about trying to make things fun."

Stars will come first to the gifting area, then walk the red carpet, before going upstairs for the viewing party and sit down dinner.

Neal has more than a dozen sponsors providing free gifts this year, some of whom have been with him every year. They include Gm Collin Skincare Paris, Handbags by Timmy Woods of Beverly Hills, Buzzies stress reducing bracelets, celebrity artist Mario Della Casa, New Age Healer Kristin Korot Inst., relationship authors Holly and Philip Wagner, author and shopping TV pitchwoman Rhonda Shear, the Bahamas Film & TV Commission and Belleeck Castle in Ireland.

Sponsors Lorimar Winery will also provide wine for the dinner while Glamour Bonbonier Chocolatier will provide chocolate Mini Oscar statues dusted with gold for the table. Rogers Burgers will feed the media.

WHEN NEAL LEARNED WALTERS WAS DONE

Neal was shocked in December when Lozzi called to tell him Walter's was done. There wouldn't be a 28th annual Night Of 100 Stars.

"I was very surprised," insisted Neal. "That conversation was sort of surreal to me."

Neal said Lozzi called him and Lozzi said he was just sharing news with a friend, but soon it was agreed that Lozzi would take over as the publicist for Neal's Oscar night events.

"We've come full circle," said Neal.

"Now we're going to make this a powerhouse party," enthused Lozzi. "It may take a few years."

While the older stars have nostalgia value, Neal believes many of them have gotten new recognition. "Social media is doing what television did for many years," said Neal, "bringing all these classic images from the past into today. It makes it very relevant again. It gives it to a whole new generation."

Neal said he loves the history and location of the Hollywood Museum but this could be his last year there because they're outgrowing it.

"I love producing the dinner," added Neal. "It's a lot of work. I have to take several days off each year afterward."

"I'm not doing it to get rich," insisted Neal. "I'm doing it just to have a fun place to go on Oscar night and help some charities and some brands and have a good time."

Ever attend either dinner? Share your experience and thoughts in our comments section below.

Tags:

Norby Walters Night of 100 Stars Rpger Neal Donald Trm Donald Trump

Jon Voight Bruce Davison Ed Lozzi Oscar Party Hollywood Museum

Donelle Dadigan Milton Berle Peter Nygard Kirk Kerkorian George H.W. Bush