

Keeping Ted's Promise

The UN Foundation one year later

BY TOM RILEY

TED TURNER HAS BEEN RIGHT ABOUT A LOT of things. He was right about cable TV. He was right about pro wrestling. (Who knew?) He was right about signing Greg Maddux. He was very right about his company's merger with Time-Warner, which has caused the combined company's stock to more than triple, netting Turner a few billion dollars in the process.

And he was right to challenge his fellow billionaires to step up to the plate as donors. His relentless talk about remaking charitable giving into the new status symbol for the ultra-rich struck some as vulgar, but it was also both timely and right. And, to his credit, Turner has walked the walk, creating the United Nations Foundation with a dramatic and much-publicized pledge of \$1 billion.

But what is Turner getting for all that money?

Turner is famously controversial, so it should have come as little surprise when critics pounced on his impulsive and hastily assembled gift (Turner had told CNN's Larry King that the pledge was a "spur of the moment" decision). After digesting the enormity of the sum, the general reaction ran along the lines of: "You're giving a billion dollars away, and the best you can do is... *the United Nations?*"

Conservatives like George Will smirked that Turner might as well pour "his money into the sea," while liberals like *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter fretted that it "could be a recipe for historic waste." John Barry and Bruno Manno of the

National Commission on Philanthropy and Civic Renewal dubbed it "one of the most haphazard and ill-thought-out gifts of all time." Just think of what Turner could have accomplished had he dedicated all that money to, say, combating illiteracy or homelessness, or—Rockefeller-like—to eradicating a particular disease.

To be sure, the United Nations is a handy whipping boy. Too often the UN seems to be a mind-bendingly bloated bureaucracy replete with Cloudkookooland conferences and an alphabet soup of acronymed agencies, working groups, councils, caucuses, and committees.

Moreover, those who have worked there know about the three-hour lunches, the workers who produce no work, and the way the sun seems to cross over the yard-arm ever so much earlier at One UN Plaza than at any other work address in Manhattan.

But those who know Turner and the patterns of his previous philanthropy were not surprised. Much has been made of the last-minute decision on the selection of beneficiary, but, in retrospect, the United Nations made sense for Turner and was perfectly consistent with his internationalist vision of the world, and the giving of the Turner Foundation (\$25 million in 1998) neatly presaged the UN gift, in character if not in size.

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GEARING UP

FOLLOWING THE INITIAL MAD SCRAMBLE OF accountants, PR flacks, and UN officials in the wake of the announcement, Turner signed up Tim Wirth, former Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs, to be executive director of the nascent United Nations Foundation (see *Philanthropy* interview, May-June 1998). Turner and Wirth soon settled on a vision, developed a program, and set up a grantmaking process with four program goals:

- *Grantmaking*—Providing additional funding for programs and people served by UN agencies.
- *Strengthening UN Institutions and Encouraging Support for the UN and UN Causes*—Helping to forge new partnerships among and between UN agencies, the private sector, and NGOs [non-governmental organizations] in order to build support for the UN and its efforts while also enhancing the effectiveness of service delivery.

In a recent speech in Washington, D.C., Turner managed to insult Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and the Ten Commandments—and still have time to call for a worldwide one-child policy and the electoral defeat of “those congressmen and senators who are standing in the way of progress.”

- *Telling the Story*—In cooperation with the Foundation’s sister organization, the Better World Fund, sponsoring or conducting outreach efforts aimed at educating the public about the UN’s unique role in addressing global issues and forging international cooperation.

- *Raising New Funds to Support UN Programs and Purposes*—Encouraging other public and private funders to join and help demonstrate what the UN and the world can do when the public and private sectors cooperate and co-invest.

Now, 18 months after the first splash of publicity, there is an established philanthropic entity with defined goals and a track record of four grant cycles. The UN Foundation (UNF) even has an extensive Web site (www.unfoundation.org) that could serve as a fine model for other donors.

Of course, the real evidence of a foundation’s objectives—the proof of the pudding—is in its grantmaking. What has UNF accomplished in each of its four areas?

Goal I—Grantmaking

THE ENVIRONMENT

THE ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS OF THE UNF DOVE-TAIL with those of the Turner Foundation, which has long been involved in environmental grantmaking. The UN structure makes particular sense for accomplishing international environmental initiatives, in that many of these issues are transnational in character.

The UNF’s environmental grants have reflected a fairly high degree of sophistication so far, reflecting Wirth, Turner, and staff’s extensive background in the area—which is either a good or bad thing depending on how on-target you think the contemporary environmental activist agenda is. To date the UNF has dedicated \$1.2 million for a biomass energy development project in China, \$1.5 million for the International Coral Reef Action Network, \$500,000 for a UN Atlas of the Oceans, and \$1 million to develop “Green Municipalities” in Nicaragua.

There is no doubting that Turner takes environmentalism seriously. Indeed, the motto of the Turner Foundation is a telling quote from Ted Turner himself: “I see the whole field of environmentalism and population as nothing more than the survival of the human species.” Heartfelt words, but doesn’t he mean to say “nothing less than”? It is this admixture of earnest determination and intellectual sloppiness that troubles some Turner critics.

CHILDREN’S HEALTH

PHILANTHROPICALLY SPEAKING, CHILDREN’S HEALTH offers a target-rich environment. It is also a field in which the UNF can really excel, if it so chooses. Critics of Turner and the UNF tend to overlook the

field, but it is, in terms of real world effect, the most important.

UNF's early activities in this area appear to be exemplary. Who can quibble with \$2.2 million for "Preventive Health Care in Africa," which provides immunizations and malaria treatment to children who live beyond the usual reach of such services? Or \$1 million for the "Elimination of Iodine Deficiency for African Youth," \$3 million "Toward the Eradication of Polio in War-afflicted Countries," or \$2.9 million "Toward the Eradication of Guinea Worm in West and Central Africa"?

POPULATION

POPULATION IS CLEARLY THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL aspect of the UNF's program. In a recent speech in Washington, D.C., to the 27th annual meeting of the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association, Turner managed to insult Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and the Ten Commandments—and still have time left to call for a worldwide one-child policy and the electoral defeat of "those congressmen and senators who are standing in the way of progress."

Some of UNF's population grants are straightforward, such as \$1.5 million dollars for a "Distance Learning System on Population Issues" and \$700,000 for "Encouraging Responsible Fatherhood in the Central African Isthmus." Others, like \$512,000 for "Implementing the Beijing Platform for Action for Women in Mozambique" and \$1.7 million for "Empowerment of Women in Water Resources Management" are not, at a certain level, different than the missionary philanthropy of great nineteenth century Western donors. Except, of course, that instead of "civilizing" the natives with Christianity and Western culture, they are attempting to do so with secularism and late twentieth century feminism.

Whether the UNF has spent wisely in the area depends, to great extent, on your view of population control programs in general. Austin Ruse is director of the Catholic Family & Human Rights Institute, a nonprofit public policy group that advises UN delegates on a broad range of family and human rights matters. Says Ruse: "If you believe the world is overpopulated, then their grants make sense. If you don't believe this, it's been a big waste of money."

Adds Ruse: "Poor countries want bridges and hospitals, and they are forced to take this population stuff. They're not really asking for condoms, they're asking for clean water and food." Drawing on a current example, he laments that,

Evaluating Grants to the UN

MEASURING THE UNF'S EFFECTIVENESS IMPLICATES A classic problem of philanthropy. It can be difficult enough to establish accountability when foundations make direct grants, but *a fortiori* when a donor pours hundreds of millions of dollars into an enormous bureaucracy. Even with its "special connection" to the Secretary General's office, the UN is famous for departments with 90 percent overhead costs. How does the UNF measure results?

According to the UNF's Harwood, the foundation has "two objectives in evaluation monitoring. Number one is basic accountability. That is, did you build the six hospitals you said you were going to build? We have negotiated arrangements for regular and follow-up reports" Objective number two, pace Harwood, "is value. We're interested in [knowing] what did you learn in the process? Did you learn how to do this better, cheaper? Will you take account of that for the next time you come to us?"

To that end, UNF has hired Charles A. Bowsher, a former comptroller general of GAO as a part-time vice president at UNF. Bowsher will help an evaluation system. The results so far? "It's still too early to know the results. There's a lag time," says Harwood, but "we are very encouraged so far."

The UNF has in fact built a monitoring and evaluation component into at least some of their project agreements. A good example is their \$860,000 grant towards cutting maternal mortality rates in Indonesia. The project seeks to add critical vitamins to the diet of pregnant women in a particularly poor section of Indonesia, thereby reducing mortality from anemia.

It sounds good, but who's to say whether the vitamins will reach the target population and, then, whether they are effective? Well, in addition to designating a monitoring agency for implementation, the agreement calls for a subsample of the pregnant women to be evaluated in more detail by teams of physicians and nutritionists at mid-pregnancy, at 2-10 days postpartum, and at 3-4 months postpartum, with their infants. In a nod to reality, infant and maternal deaths will be investigated by autopsies. UNF succinctly lays out their goal for the program: "Success will be judged by the reduction in maternal deaths."

Another project review form which UNF chose to share with *Philanthropy* involved a \$480,000 grant through the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to help women in Burkina Faso learn how to profit from the recent worldwide demand for shea butter, a product of the locally-grown shea nut. Shea butter is used in a number of skin and hair care products, as well as in gourmet food items. The project is intended to teach local women how to collect, store and market shea butter to international busi-

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"The Kosovars are reaching out for food and medicine, and they're literally being handed condoms."

Indeed, according to the UN Population Fund's own data, 22 percent of Haitian women have access to clean water, but 88 percent have access to contraceptives. Ruse concludes that "for most poor women in the world, maternal health care is penicillin—not manual vacuum aspirators [inexpensive abortion devices]."

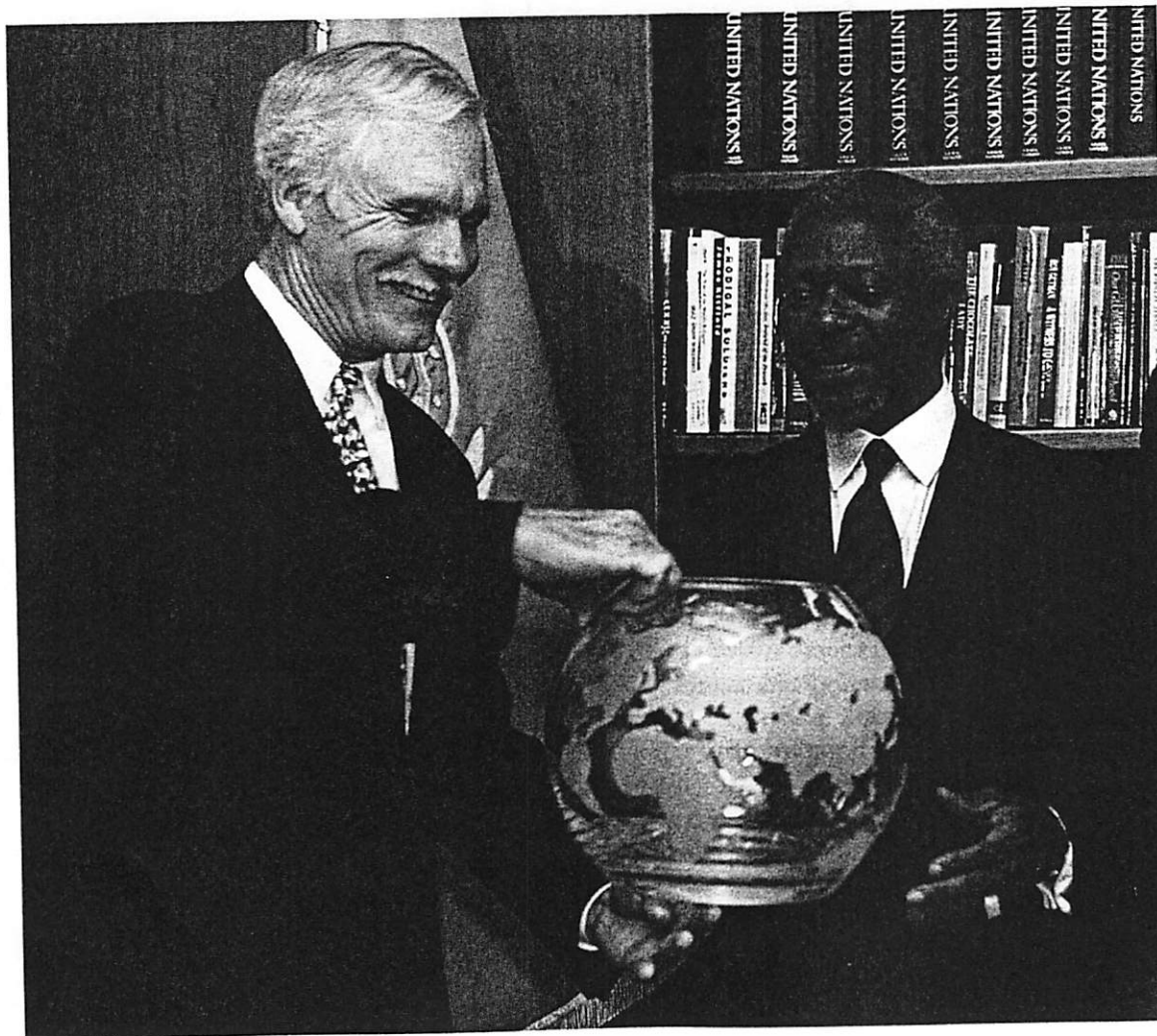
OTHER HUMANITARIAN CAUSES

HUMANITARIAN CAUSES IS THE GRAB-BAG "EVERYTHING ELSE" category, and as such it includes such disparate items as \$3.8 million for "Land-Mine Clearance in 10 countries," \$1.1 million to demobilize children soldiers in Sierra Leone, and an emergency \$1 million grant for refugees in Kosovo. The UNF's humanitarian grants are something of a microcosm of the larger overall pattern of the foundation's giving, running the gamut from the

unquestionably worthy—\$440,000 for the production and distribution of booklets on land-mine safety—to the dubious—\$1.5 million for "Legal Empowerment of Indigenous Peoples in Central America."

Goal II—Strengthening UN Institutions and Encouraging Support for the UN and UN Causes

WHEN DONORS SELECT AN ORGANIZATION TO serve as a conduit for their philanthropy, they often attend to the structural health of that organization. The UN's financial health is indisputably creaky, and the UNF has been happy to invest in some institutional shoring-up. The UNF indirectly supports the UN by providing a cushion of "fungibility." This avenue of support will be immediately apparent to experienced donors and fundraisers, even if it is not to most casual observers.



United Nations Foundation Chairman Ted Turner and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

The UN would have funded many of the projects funded by the UNF even without the UNF's support. But by offering carefully selected, choice morsels to the UNF that meet its particular tastes, the UN is free to pay for less glamorous items, like payroll, utilities, and maintenance. Fungibility works especially well for the UN, in that many of the specific items that the U.S. Congress balks at funding are precisely those in which Turner is interested. If the Congress slashes \$25 million from the UN Population Fund, the UNF can make up the difference. What Congress taketh away, the UNF giveth.

Goal III—Telling the Story

TURNER BELIEVES THAT A BIG PART OF THE UN'S problem stems from popular ignorance of the worthiness of the UN's mission. To that extent, the UNF is making a deliberate effort to "tell the UN's story." Of course, someone with Turner's media influence and flair for publicity is the ideal person to tell almost any story.

As a music critic once said, people who like this sort of thing will like this sort of thing. That is, if you think that the UN is a great institution with an inspiring story to tell, as Turner manifestly does, then this is a vitally important component of support. If, on the other hand, you think the UN as currently constituted and run is a monstrous sinkhole of waste, then giving of this sort is at best ineffectual, and at worst throwing fuel on the fire.

But for the UNF, the story to be told is not just the story of the UN, but that of Turner's international vision of a better world. To pick but one example from among many, UNF documents on the issue of population control suggest that the foundation is laboring under a categorical imperative to not only support population control programs, but also to educate the world about the benefits of same:

Far more difficult [than telling the story] is the challenge of marshaling the necessary political will and worldwide coordination needed to transform the plan from vision to reality. Far too many individuals and institutions are wary, if not willfully neglectful, of the population issue—touching as it does on sensitive and highly personal issues.... Together, evasion, complacency and resistance are powerful hurdles to progress. Therefore, the challenge now is not one of academic endeavor or intellectual pursuit, rather it

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nesses. The evaluation component for this project (5 percent of the overall budget) consists of "regular visits" by the UNIFEM program advisor, along with six-month progress and financial reports, a year-end evaluation to consider revising objectives, and a final external evaluation.

As with the maternal mortality program, the UNF's goals for the shea butter program are straightforward: Success will mean that "the incomes of the women participating increase due to a higher level of demand for (and their ability to supply) their shea butter." Whatever the intrinsic merit of the program, UNIFEM and UNF are wise to expand their focus beyond short-term income boosts, placing an emphasis on teaching these women about the workings of international markets. If carried out properly, this program will teach women far more about business than about shea butter.

The UNF Board of Directors

ACCORDING TO THE UNF, THE ORGANIZATION'S BOARD members "all have a demonstrated record of leadership and accomplishment in their fields and on matters relevant to the UN and its work around the world." Besides Turner and Wirth, there is Andrew Young, the former UN Ambassador and mayor of Atlanta. Also on the board is Maurice Strong, a wealthy Canadian and longtime friend of both Turner and Wirth, who has served in a number of important UN capacities. Strong has actively championed greater UN support and authority and has frequently been mentioned as a future Secretary General. This core group voted in the rest of the board: English environmentalist Emma Rothschild, Pakistani economist Muhammed Yunus, Brazilian First Lady Ruth Cardoso, and former Mozambiquean First Lady Graca Machel (better known as Mrs. Nelson Mandela).

is one of reestablishing widespread recognition of the challenge and then developing and sustaining the will necessary to do what so clearly needs to be done.

"Evasion, complacency and resistance are powerful hurdles to progress"? Sometimes it sounds as though the UN Foundation is only telling one side of the story. And telling it loudly. To tell the story more effectively—and to avoid problems and requirements that come along with lobbying—Turner has established the Better World Fund as a "sister organization" to the UNF, to shoulder much of the "Telling the Story" load.

Goal IV—Raising New Funds to Support UN Programs and Purposes

TURNER HAS BEEN LOUDLY CRITICAL OF THE U.S. “failure” to pay its arrears. Publicly and from the beginning, one of the UNF’s aims was to prod the U.S. to pay its dues. The UNF sees this as an important—indeed critical—step for the UN, and, thus, efforts to persuade other people of the wisdom of this goal are a natural part of the UNF’s mission.

Wirth’s chief of staff, David Harwood, points out that when it comes to the question of influencing U.S. policy makers, in certain regards “we’re no different than the Heritage Foundation.” When asked whether they encouraged other debtor governments to pay their back dues, they reply that “All nations should pay their dues, on time and without condition.” The UNF focuses principally on the U.S. debt, since the “U.S. is so hugely in arrears, and because of the impact that has on the organization.”

If you think the UN as currently constituted and run is a monstrous sinkhole of waste, then giving of this sort is at best ineffectual, and at worst throwing fuel on the fire.

Interestingly, before endowing the UNF, Turner flirted with the notion of simply paying off the entire U.S. debt himself. He gave up that idea when he realized that the Republican-controlled U.S. Congress could simply refuse to repay him. Tax planning considerations may have entered the picture as well: contributions to the United Nations are not tax-deductible, whereas gifts to the UNF, a public charity, are.

THE SUN NEVER SETS ON THE TURNER EMPIRE

TURNER CRITICS WERE QUICK TO CRY THAT HE had bought his way into unaccountable and inappropriate influence within the UN—an organization of sovereign nations. Did Ted Turner now

count more at the UN than say, Uruguay or Uzbekistan?

Of course, it’s not that simple. Indeed, it seems as if every graduate student who has studied the UN in the last 15 years has written a paper titled something like, “The Growing Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the UN.” The role of these non-state entities is an ongoing debate, but they have indisputably carved out a substantial niche.

UN spokespeople are quick to point out that there is a substantial and constructive tradition of private giving to the UN, from the original Rockefeller grant of the land on which UN headquarters is situated to the millions of dollars that flow to UNICEF every year. According to UN press officer Miriam Dessables, the UN receives charitable gifts “all the time—just not this much.” This has not resulted, they insist, in any undue influence.

For their part, the staff of the UNF earnestly explain that their influence is limited to the role that the UN allows them. They solicit no proposals. Rather, the UNF submitted a number of program “interests” and priorities to the UN, which then responded by offering projects for funding. According to this model, the UNF can only fund—or influence—what the UN offers them.

David Harwood, echoes the point: “We tell [the UN member states] what our priorities are, then they offer us proposals. If we said, ‘We want you to go build bridges in Cleveland,’ they would say ‘Forget it, because that’s not our mandate.’”

Of course, experienced donors know that the reality is a bit more nuanced. However scrupulously and professionally administered, money exerts influence. And the influence exerted grows exponentially relative to both the amount of money involved and the direness of the recipient’s need. Austin Ruse points out that, “The UN is responsive to its donors, whether they are states or NGOs. And Turner is an NGO.”

TOO SOON TO TELL?

AND THE RESULTS SO FAR? THE UNF’S HARWOOD proclaims himself “very encouraged so far,” though it is “still too early to know the results.”

Shortly after making the gift, Turner told a reporter that: “There’s a lot of people who are awash in money they don’t know what to do with. It doesn’t do you any good if you don’t know what to do with it.” There is a lot of good that Turner’s money can do while washing through the UNF. And they have made a serious and professional start of it. But the pressure is now on UNF to make sure that Turner’s goodwill winds up funding more than bureaucratic games. ■