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FINDINGS

Wanted: Billionaire Risk-Takers Seeking Eternal Renown

By JOHN TIERNEY
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If you are a billionaire, ideally a decabillionaire, pondering your legacy, I have a proposition and a question for you. The proposition is immortal glory for you (plus, as a potential spinoff, the survival of humanity). The question is: How many rich people are still admired five centuries after their death for what they did with their money?



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How To Get To Mars (And Make Millions!)John Tierney, New York Times Magazine, May 26, 1996.

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Try to name some pre-1500 plutocrats. It's not easy. You might come up with a pharaoh or two still remembered for his tomb, or art patrons like the Medicis. But these are risky role models. How could you be sure anything you built would even last 500 years, much less impress our descendants? What are the odds that modern art will be remembered in 2600 as a second Renaissance?

But consider these role models: Prince Henry the Navigator, King Ferdinand, Queen Isabella. Prince Henry ensured his place in history textbooks by financing the 15th-century Portuguese expeditions down the African coast that began the Age of Exploration. Then Ferdinand and Isabella sponsored Columbus, turning themselves into permanent one-name celebrities: a Brad and Angelina for the ages.

You're too late to start a new age of exploration — Nikita S. Khrushchev and [John F. Kennedy](#) beat you to it — but a new world is there for the taking. Why waste your money on football teams or America's Cup yachts when you could send the first humans to Mars?

This is a once-in-a-planet's-lifetime opportunity to win eternal renown — and perform a lasting public service that won't be done anytime soon by any public agency. Politicians are understandably leery of a Mars mission, and not only because the payoff would come decades after the next election. It's hard to make a moral case for cutting social programs and science research (like climatology or unmanned space probes) to spend tens or hundreds of billions of dollars to put a human on Mars.

But a billionaire doesn't have to answer to voters. You can take the long view of Mars as our next home, a wilderness to be "terraformed" into a livable backup planet in case of disaster on Earth. And you can get to Mars much more quickly and cheaply than [NASA](#), because you can avoid pork-barrel spending and you can take more risks. It's not a public scandal when private explorers make fatal mistakes.

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Robert Zubrin, the head of the Mars Society, figures a private explorer could get there within a decade for \$8 billion to \$10 billion, and a good chunk of that cost — maybe all of it — could be offset with revenues from media rights and marketing tie-ins. Elon Musk, the Paypal founder who's now building rockets in his new company, SpaceX, guesses it could be done for just \$5 billion.

"It would be neat to have a one-time \$5 billion mission to Mars," he told me, "but \$5 billion is still far too much. There's no way that we could establish any kind of base on Mars or any kind of self-sustaining biology there. We need to get that first mission to under \$1 billion, and then the later missions down to under \$100 million."

Mr. Musk says his goal is to help establish a colony on Mars by lowering the cost of launching payloads into space, but his company's not ready to go up there until the venture looks profitable.

Sir [Richard Branson](#) is in a similar position with his new company, Virgin Galactic, which is hoping to make money by taking customers on suborbital flights.

"We'd leap at the chance to go Mars," he told me, explaining that he'd be glad to start working on it if NASA offered prizes for entrepreneurs who came up with the best plans and pieces of hardware for the mission. The prizes would be a wonderfully cheap way to spur innovation, but NASA and Congress show no interest in offering them.

So for now it takes someone with deep pockets to aim for Mars. If you don't want to put up all the cash yourself, you could form a consortium, like the Peary Arctic Club that financed the attempts to reach the North Pole, or the private investors who joined Ferdinand and Isabella in sponsoring Columbus.

There's also a clever way that you could raise money — and stoke public interest — while retaining control. Offer everyone a chance to ride on your spaceship. You could run a straight lottery on the Internet, or sell shares in a corporation that gave each shareholder a ticket in a lottery. There could be regular drawings, with each winner getting a chance to undergo training and testing with the astronauts.

The grand winner, the one who gets a seat on the spaceship, could be chosen either by you or by the public. Imagine the ratings for "Martian Idol." (If you'd like to see some preliminary market research on the lottery, check out tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com, where I'm asking nonbillionaire readers how much they would spend on tickets.)

I think you could more than break even on the expedition, but maybe it sounds too complicated. If you're too busy to organize an expedition yourself, you could instead offer a prize or a series of prizes (and let the [X Prize Foundation](#) manage it for you). By putting up \$5 billion, preferably more, you might start a competition as exciting as the race to the South Pole a century ago.

A prize would be blessedly simple for you, but it does have one drawback. Although prizes spurred many of the early feats in aviation, we remember the winners, not the sponsors. How many people know that a New York hotelier named Raymond Orteig put up the \$25,000 prize won by [Charles Lindbergh](#) for flying from New York to Paris?

But everybody remembers the Spirit of St. Louis, just as they remember the Santa Maria and the Mayflower and Apollo 11. So here is my last piece of advice. Whether you offer a prize or send your own expedition, insist that the ship carrying the first humans to Mars be named after you. Sure, you'll be accused of egotism, but pay the critics no heed. They'll be dead soon enough. Your name will live forever.

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