



Ted Turner gives the press corps an earful.

Turner takes a swing at Time Warner

By Harry A. Jessell

Ted Turner last week declared his independence. All he has to do now is win the war.

In a very public speech—at the National Press Club before several TV cameras, including C-SPAN's—Turner demanded his freedom from Time Warner, charging that the 20% owner of Turner Broadcasting System was blocking his efforts to acquire a broadcast network.

"While they go out and try and get a network of their own, they're holding me back from doing so," Turner said. "And it just isn't right." Time Warner reportedly has talked with NBC.

With 20% of the stock, Time Warner has three seats on the TBS board and virtual veto power over any big deals Turner cooks up.

Turner alleged that Time Warner had nixed a deal he had last year to buy NBC for \$5 billion.

Now the opportunity to buy NBC is over, Turner said. GE, NBC's owner, wants to retain control of the network. "That's the reason that the talks broke off with Disney." And, he added, NBC "won't talk to me until I have clearances from my handlers."

GE Chairman Jack Welch, in a PBS interview later in the day, said Turner "never had a deal to buy NBC, never." But he conceded GE has had discussions with Turner. NBC President Bob Wright "talks to him a lot," said Welch.

Selling NBC is not a "highly proba-

ble option" for GE, Welch said, confirming Turner's opinion. The network is "more likely to get bigger and broader in this industry," he said, adding that current discussions involve "a changing relationship for NBC."

Time Warner had no comment on Turner's remarks.

Turner apparently has a much better relationship with TBS's other major minority shareholder, Tele-Communications Inc. "I'm on Ted's side," said TCI President John Malone in Washington the day before the speech. "Anything he wants to do and he's

allowed to do, we will support."

According to Turner, Time Warner earlier blocked his plans to buy FNN and the Home Shopping Network and it tried to prevent him from buying the Castle Rock and NewLine studios. "I had to...go almost to war with them."

Aside from excoriating Time Warner, Turner didn't say what he would do to win his freedom. But he issued a veiled threat: "I haven't made any charges, I haven't filed any lawsuits, I haven't filed any complaints with the FCC or the Justice Department...yet."

Owning a broadcast network is critical, according to Turner. Without the near-universal coverage that only a network can deliver, he said, TBS cannot become a major media player.

Rival media mogul Rupert Murdoch already owns Fox, Turner said, and Disney, Viacom and Time Warner eventually will take over the other three. "So, hey, if all of them get networks...I'm sitting on the outside."

If he can't get Time Warner out of his way, he said, he might as well sell TBS. But that is not his intention. "I want to be able to play at the big game."

For Turner, the speech was a return to old form, to the outrageousness that marked his public appearances in the 1970s and early 1980s.

Turner's other purpose at the NPC was to condemn as "barbaric mutilation" the practice of female circumcisions, or clitorectomies, in some cultures. Turner made his point, but couldn't let it go before returning to his first purpose. "I'm being clitorized by Time Warner," he said. ■

BellSouth wins right to offer cable

Chalk up another big victory for the telcos.

A federal judge in Alabama has ruled that BellSouth has a constitutional right to offer in-region cable TV service, marking the third such telco victory in little more than a year. Bell Atlantic won a similar court victory last August, and US West won a case in June.

In each case, the federal courts have struck down as unconstitutional a provision of the 1984 Cable Act that prohibits telcos from providing cable TV programming in their local service region.

The federal courts are succeeding where Congress has failed in giving telcos a green light into the cable business. Congress last month shelved a controversial information superhighway bill that would have permitted telephone and cable companies to compete with each other.

Although the BellSouth decision specifically gives the company approval to provide cable TV service to Vestavia Hills, Ala., a spokesman for the telco says the ruling is seen as giving BellSouth permission to offer service anywhere in its nine-state local service region.

The National Cable Television Association, which favors the crossownership bans, said it remains confident all the cases will be reversed on appeal. —RB