

BAD BOY BALLMER

The Man Who Rules Microsoft

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"One analyst calls Microsoft 'the Bill and Steve Show'. A former company vice president talks about 'the personality of Gates and Ballmer'. Though much of the time Gates and Ballmer act as a single unit, when they divide it is along set lines. Gates is the techie, the strategist, the commander-in-chief. Ballmer's the business guy, the tactician, the field marshal. Gates ran the antitrust trial defense while Ballmer was running the company. Gates is a 'balance sheet' person. Ballmer is an 'income statement' type. A former coworker says, 'Gates likes really smart people, period. Steve likes guys who get stuff done'."

– Fredric Maxwell

"Microsoft today could stop producing software, close up shop, give away a copy of Windows XP to every one of the over six billion human beings on the planet, and still be more profitable than over 99-percent of all American companies. Microsoft could lay off all fifty thousand of its employees, giving each one of them one hundred thousand dollars in severance pay plus ten thousand shares of stock, and it would still have over twenty-five billion dollars in its coffers. A 10-percent annual return on its remaining wealth would give it two and a half billion dollars a year in income. Imagine a true challenge for Gates and Ballmer. In negotiations with the Justice Department, Gates said, 'You can give me any seat at the table at Linux, Sun or any other tech company, and I can blow away Microsoft!' If, like Silicon Graphics and Netscape founder Jim Clark, Gates and Ballmer just walked away from Microsoft and started all over again with, say, a measly billion dollars each, they'd find a way to make another personal computer operating system and give their former company a run for the money."

– Fredric Maxwell

"The good boy Ballmer, his higher self, was the nearly perfect student and supportive classmate who won full-ride scholarships to prep school, Harvard, and then Stanford. He was the beloved but awkward valedictorian of his class. He was the devoted son who made sure his father of relatively modest means received over a million dollars worth of stock in Microsoft's 1986 IPO. He's also the unpretentious, well-grounded corporate cheerleader who will do cartwheels on stage to prove a point, even if that means shouting out Microsoft's 'Win-doze! Win-doze! Win-doze!' so loudly that he ripped his vocal chords. He is known for making his employees want to dig deeply into themselves and bring out their absolute best, if not for themselves then for him. But, of course, there's also the bad boy Ballmer, the earthier level of his soul. It was this Ballmer who announced impending software release dates fully aware some couldn't happen until years later, a business practice he knew IBM had been forced to stop, a move coldly calculated to stifle Microsoft customers' interest in competing products. Ballmer proclaimed there was a 'Chinese Wall' between Microsoft's operating system monopoly and applications division when no such thing existed. There's the General Sherman war-is-hell Ballmer, who carried out the pilferage of competitor's products with a so-sue-us attitude, which many of the judges and juries forced to referee the conflicts would find Microsoft guilty of. And there's the dark side of Ballmer, who ominously thundered at a client who'd signed up with rival Netscape, 'You're either with us or against us, and you're the enemy now!'. Ballmer is vast. Ballmer contains multitudes."

– Fredric Maxwell

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Steven Anthony Ballmer, the future CEO of Microsoft, was born in March 1956. His father, Fred Ballmer, was a Swiss immigrant who worked for the Ford Motor Company. Before moving to the United States, Fred Ballmer had worked for a short time as an interpreter at the International Military Tribunal held at Nuremberg. Steve's mother Beatrice Dworkin was born in Detroit, the child of Russian immigrants who had come to the United States and found work in the auto industry.

To advance his career at Ford, Fred Ballmer took his young family to Belgium for three years. While there, Steven learned to speak perfect French before his family moved back to Michigan. The Ballmers were a very close-knit family.

"My dad liked to ask questions and think things through completely. I remember my dad, when I was a kid, explaining to me how domestic international sales corporations worked. It's a tax thing the U.S. Government probably never should have done, but once they did it, Ford had to drive a truck through it. But it was so complicated. I never to this day could understand how my dad just went through all the details, saw all of the opportunities. Neither of my parents ever went to college, but I can remember my dad just assuming I would."

– Steve Ballmer

At school, Steve Ballmer quickly made a name for himself as someone that could not be ignored. Not only was he always big for his age, he was also very smart and had the loudest voice. He attended the Detroit Country Day School – the same school which produced the actors Robin Williams, Christine Lahti, Laura Innes and Tim Allen as well as Michael Kinsley and the co-founder of Sun Microsystems, Scott McNealy.

"Steve was the brightest of the bright. Everybody, after a few minutes, would know his amazing intelligence. Steve was always, I don't want to say overly animated, but extremely animated. Both mentally and physically. He came here in the ninth grade, and he was probably a year or two behind us in math. By the end of the tenth grade, he was a year and a half ahead of us. I'm not joking. He would sit in the very front row. We'd be talking about something when the teacher would ask a question and you'd see him get really kind of agitated, because he couldn't figure it out. If you took the Steve we knew at Country Day, and flashed forward twenty years to where you'd think he'd be, I think he'd be designing computer chips. Everything I read about Steve – whether he blew his vocal cords at some meeting, that he gets up and screams, sometimes screams things that are not always the most considerate – that's exactly what I would expect. Those are all in his personality traits. All that is totally consistent with exactly the same guy he was in tenth grade."

– Todd Rich (a medical doctor and genetic researcher)

"Steve would get up in front of the class, at the blackboard, and explain a problem. Hands all over the place, chalk moving. He'd be writing with one hand and have an eraser in the other and be writing and erasing at the same time. He had this what I call intellectual energy. I don't know how he shuts down at night, to be honest with you. A very high level of intellectual energy. You couldn't stump him. Never. It's laughable, but he'd be a great candidate for Who Wants to Be a Millionaire."

– Gerald Hansen, maths teacher

While Steve Ballmer's academic activities were impressive, he also plunged into sports with equal enthusiasm. In addition to playing on his school's football team, Steve also managed the

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