In 1995, Art Modell used Al Lerner's private jet as a modern-day Appomattox Court House, signing the papers that ceded Cleveland's football franchise to Baltimore.

Lerner was not an active participant in facilitating Modell's move, but he was guilty by association, guilty of providing the house where the murder took place. Since Lerner's plane was involved in Modell's escape 17 years ago, the Lerner family has been star-crossed in their football pursuits.

In 1998, Al Lerner used his vast wealth as a self-made billionaire to purchase the replacement franchise for the one that departed Cleveland on his jet. He outbid Larry and Charles Dolan, prior to Larry Dolan purchasing the Indians in 2000. From the outset, Lerner spared no expense in trying to give the new Browns everything money could buy. He lured flamboyant executive and Younstown native Carmen Policy away from the 49ers to run the show. Policy brought Dwight Clark with him as his handpicked general manager.

Policy talked a good game, but his organization-building acumen was found to be sorely lacking. Clark was outed as a clueless roster architect. Chris Palmer, their coaching hire, lasted all of two seasons and five victories.

Butch Davis took over, with a resume that included a stint as an assistant on Super Bowl winners in Dallas and as the coach who rebuilt the University of Miami football program as a national power. He led the Browns to their first competitive seasons -- a 7-9 record in 2001 and a 9-7 record with a playoff appearance in 2002, but much like Clark before him, he was exposed as a lousy drafter and an even worse locker-room manager. He was gone by 2005.

It was during Davis' tenure that Al Lerner died of brain cancer. His 2002 passing paved the way for his son, Randy, to take over the family businesses, including the Browns. Randy was a media-shy legacy owner from a privileged background. The rare media exposure he allowed seemed to indicate the junior Lerner was a quiet, intelligent person who was a seriously devoted Browns fan and seriously wanted the team to win.

The trouble is, he wasn't much of a football fan overall, and he wasn't much of a leader. With his personal interest leaning toward British soccer and a lack of desire to oversee the Browns organization on a daily basis, Lerner kept looking for the organizational guru who could take the burden of the Browns off his hands.

Phil Savage. Romeo Crennel. Eric Mangini. Mike Holmgren. They all came to Cleveland with impressive resumes. The first three went the way of Clark and Davis, exposed as poor matches for their roles. Holmgren has thus far overseen 5-11 and 4-12 seasons, and the clock is ticking.

It all doesn't really seem to make sense, given the resumes of the men who have come through Cleveland, tasked with rescuing the once-proud Cleveland Browns name. They came from key positions on successful franchises such as the 49ers, Cowboys, Ravens, Patriots and Packers. They have all failed miserably to this point.

It's as if the Lerner family has been cursed with some kind of anti-Midas touch when it comes to football. Millions upon millions of dollars spent on trying to turn the Browns around, and the net result has been a endless parade of last-place finishes and turnover at key positions.

Which is why the news this past week that Lerner is apparently on the verge of selling the Browns to a group led by Pilot Travel Centers president Jimmy Haslam III is bittersweet.

Selling the Browns before completing a turnaround had to be among the toughest decision Lerner has ever had to make. Lerner doesn't want his family's name -- associated with success and philanthropy in other arenas -- to go down in history as a failure on the NFL stage. He doesn't want his father's legacy to bear the scars. But year after year of losing, year after year of best-laid plans going awry, takes its toll.

In an interview with Scene Magazine last year, Lerner expressed a desire to see the Browns' rebuild through to completion, but "At some point, if things never change, you have to look at yourself and decide if you're the man for the job,"

If this sale happens, Lerner apparently answered that question for himself. In terms of heart and hope, he is the right man for the job. In terms of execution and involvement, he is sorely lacking. The first two qualities make you a good fan. The latter two qualities make you a good executive.

Haslam will become a man of increasing interest in the coming weeks, barring something slamming the brakes on the sale. He's the son of Pilot founder Jim Haslam Jr., who was an offensive lineman on the University of Tennessee's 1951 national championship team. The Haslam family -- which also includes Jim's son and Jimmy's brother Bill Haslam, the current governor of Tennessee -- have donated millions of dollars to the university and are highly active in community causes in their hometown of Knoxville and throughout eastern Tennessee.

Browns fans have a degree of pre-emptive suspicion about Haslam, who has been a minority owner of the Steelers since 2008 and a professed "1,000-percent Steeler fan." Fortunately, we're talking about business, not rooting interests. The reported sale price of the Browns could top $900 million. It's highly doubtful that Haslam would lay down that kind of money with a nefarious ulterior motive aimed at increasing the Steelers' already-vast competitive advantage. Saboteurs make bad businessmen.

Could Haslam move the Browns? The Browns have a lease with the city that runs through 2028. But leases can be broken through litigation and compromise. Modell did it. Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest media market, has been without an NFL team since 1996. It could be a tempting target for an ownership regime that has no ties to Cleveland.

But there is nothing in the Browns' current situation that would indicate that they're ripe for a move. Their stadium is still modern and they sell out every home game despite the poor on-field product. Holmgren told the media on Friday that Lerner asked for and received an assurance that the team would not be moved. That's about all the evidence and assurance you can ask to receive, short of getting it directly from Haslam. If and when this sale becomes final, Haslam will appear at a press conference, where the subject is sure to come up.

Who stands to risk the most from an ownership change? It could be Holmgren himself, and his handpicked staff. Haslam will be eager to make his mark as an NFL owner, and if the Browns once again disappoint on the field this season, the odds of Haslam cleaning house and bringing in his own people go way up.

As it is, Holmgren was brought in to serve as the organizational figurehead because Lerner is so camera-shy. With a new owner, a new dynamic develops with Holmgren, and that might be enough to hasten Holmgren's exit from the organization.

You should be more concerned about the futures of GM Tom Heckert and head coach Pat Shurmur anyway. They are the primary football decision-makers. It is within the owner's rights to hire his own people, but it would still be another chapter in a Browns story frought with instability and turnover. The revolving door has to stop at some point.

There is always uncertainty with any change at the highest levels of an organization. But in this case, the uncertainty of what Haslam brings to the table is probably preferable to the known quantity of the Lerner family. No one wants to see Randy Lerner go off gently into that good night as a football failure. But he and his dad had 13 years to get this right, and they never did. It is time for someone else to come aboard and captain the ship. It has been time for quite a while.