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# MARY CUNNINGHAM AND THE PRESS: WHO SAID WHAT AND HOW?

Mildred S. Myers

In October 1980, Mary Cunningham and William Agee hit the headlines, unleashing a cascade of stories in newspapers and magazines that has not stopped yet. He was, at the time, Chairman of the Board of Bendix Corporation, a position he resigned in 1983 when Bendix became a subsidiary of Allied Corporation. She was a Bendix Vice President then and now is a Vice President at Joseph E. Seagram & Sons, Inc. The initial excitement resulted from her rapid rise up the executive ladder at Bendix, from Executive Assistant to Agee in 1979 to Vice President for Corporate Affairs and then Vice President for Planning in 1980. Her "fast-track" career became a news story in the course of various power struggles among Bendix executives and board members in the summer and early fall of 1980. Some observers and commentators attributed her promotions to a personal relationship with Agee rather than to her business acumen, but others cited her Harvard Business School training and pointed out that many men have made similar progress without eyebrows being raised. After the initial barrage of publicity, Mary Cunningham resigned from Bendix and, a few months later, went to work for Seagram. She and Agee were married in 1982.

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The flood of articles about Cunningham and Agee abated to a trickle between late 1980 and the fall of 1982. There was a little coverage of her appointment at Seagram, and Cunningham herself wrote a few articles, not about her experiences specifically, but about business and its values. She, Agee, and their relationship resurfaced in September 1982, when Bendix attempted to take over Martin Marietta Corporation. Cunningham, who had helped to develop some of Bendix's acquisition plans during her tenure there, was one of Agee's business advisers during the negotiations, on her own time or vacation time from Seagram. Her presence on Bendix's team of advisers was noted and commented on in nearly all of the media coverage of the negotiations. There also were extensive reviews of the 1980 situation and subsequent events in Cunningham's and Agee's lives.

A question arises from all of this coverage: why was so much attention focused on these two people and their activities? Perhaps they represent or serve as a focal point for several issues of contemporary concern, issues that suggest or threaten changes in our social-value systems. For example, looking at Mary Cunningham means thinking about new and different professional roles for women, which may lead to changes in traditional family structures and activities. These are big, emotional issues and may account for our fascination with these two individuals.

The articles about Cunningham and Agee have appeared in the business press, in general and popular magazines and newspapers, and in women's magazines. Coverage has ranged from hostile to satiric to sympathetic to maudlin to almost psychoanalytic.<sup>1</sup> This study was undertaken to answer some questions about the range of stories that appeared in the press. Are the attitudes toward Cunningham and Agee favorable or unfavorable in these articles? Did the writers display differences in attitude toward one or the other of them? Which media format was most critical—the business press, women's magazines, or the general or popular press? Casual reading seemed to suggest that the business press was critical of both of them, but especially of Agee, that the general press was more interested in Cunningham and especially interested in her youth and appearance, and that the women's magazines had little to say about them. The purpose of this study, then, was to examine systematically coverage of Mary Cunningham and William Agee to determine:

- (1) Which types of newspapers and magazines (business-oriented, general, or women's) had the most to say about them;
- (2) Was what was said favorable or unfavorable; and
- (3) How were favorable or unfavorable impressions created in the stories?

### Method

A computer search of bibliographic data bases identified newspaper and magazine articles mentioning Mary Cunningham and

William Agee from October 1980 through October 1982. Nearly all of the major business journals, national newspapers and news magazines, and women's magazines are indexed in these data bases. Articles written by Mary Cunningham and letters to the editor were eliminated, leaving the thirty-nine articles that are listed in the Appendix. Fifteen were from the business press, represented by the *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, and *Fortune*. The general and popular press accounted for twenty-two articles, from *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Parade*, *People*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Pittsburgh Press*, and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. Stories from the latter two were national wire-service stories or nationally syndicated articles such as Gail Sheehy's 1980 five-part series on Cunningham. Only two articles appeared in women's magazines—one in *Mademoiselle* and the other in *Savvy*. (*Working Woman* ran two articles by Mary Cunningham during the period, each of which generated several letters to the editor, but no articles about her.)

Copies of the thirty-nine articles were secured. Each article was analyzed for "favorable," "unfavorable," and "stereotypic" references. Included in the last category were, for the most part, comments about Cunningham's or Agee's physical appearance or age. After considering a number of methodologies for content analysis, I used a coding system adapted from one developed by John C. Merrill for his study of *Time* magazine's treatment of three United States Presidents.<sup>2</sup> Merrill set up six bias categories for classifying article content.

In this study, two of Merrill's categories—"adjective bias" and "adverbial bias"—were used exactly as he defined them: "*Adjective bias* is a type which . . . attempts to build

up an impression of the person described; this is accomplished by using adjectives, favorable or unfavorable, in connection with the person."<sup>3</sup> Examples of favorable adjective bias include a description of Mary Cunningham as a "talented person," or a reference to William Agee's "energetic" management style. Examples of unfavorable adjective bias are a characterization of Cunningham as "manipulative" or of Agee as "bossy."

Merrill defined adverbial bias as follows:

*Adverbial bias* depends on qualifiers or magnifiers—adverbs—to create an impression in the reader's mind. Often this adverbial bias is a sort of reinforcing of another bias expression already present (e.g., where an adverb reinforces an attribution bias as in this case: "He barked sarcastically.") This is a technique by which the magazine creates a favorable or unfavorable impression in the mind of the reader by generally telling *how* or *why* a person said or did something.<sup>4</sup>

In favorable adverbial bias, a writer states that Cunningham behaved "professionally" or that Agee spoke "candidly." On the other hand, descriptions of Cunningham as "sharply ambitious" or of Agee as exhibiting "remarkably poor judgment" were examples of unfavorable adverbial bias.

In my study, Merrill's "attribution bias" (contained in positive or negative synonyms for the word "said") was expanded to encompass "verb bias," as in Mary Cunningham "flaunted her power" (unfavorable) or Agee "was heralded" as an up-and-coming executive (favorable).

Merrill's other bias categories ("contextual," "outright opinion," and "photographic") were too complex or otherwise inappropriate for this study. Instead, another part-of-speech category—"noun bias"—was created, working in the same way as the others. For example, characterization of Cunningham as an "execu-

tive" was considered to be favorable noun bias, while a reference to William Agee as an "instigator" was unfavorable.

"Stereotypic" references occurred among all of the four parts of speech. They were considered neither favorable nor unfavorable, but were included because they contributed to the picture being painted of Cunningham or Agee. For example, descriptions of Mary Cunningham as "young," "beautiful," or "blonde" or of Agee as "handsome" or "young" could be called favorable in a general sense. They were irrelevant to the story in most instances, however, and seemed to serve primarily as background detail that writers chose to provide.

All of the articles were analyzed for favorable, unfavorable, or stereotypic nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Completely neutral words (e.g., Cunningham "said," or references to Agee as the "chairman" of Bendix) were not counted. Frequencies were obtained for each of the four parts of speech in each article and aggregated for each of the three publication categories.

A special, cautionary note is in order here. Every effort was made to apply the coding system as precisely and objectively as possible. In the few instances where there was serious doubt about whether or not a word was favorable or unfavorable, the tendency was to consider it neutral rather than to risk counting it incorrectly. Admittedly, judgment and interpretation were involved, and other investigators might not agree with every selection. The totals and differences are so large, however, that the overall results probably would not be affected.

## Results

Table 1 lists the numbers of favorable, unfavorable, and stereo-

typic references to Cunningham and Agee. Overall, coverage of Cunningham was more favorable than unfavorable, by a small margin (85 favorable references to 79 unfavorable). For Agee, the figures were reversed and the differences far greater, with 116 unfavorable references and 44 favorable, close to a three-to-one margin. There were also major differences in stereotypic references to the two: 46 for Cunningham and only 8 for Agee.

all unfavorable references to Cunningham and 63.8 percent of those critical of Agee.

The largest concentration of articles was in general magazines and newspapers, which accounted for 57.9 percent of the total. These articles were favorable to Mary Cunningham by a relatively small margin—59 favorable references to 44 unfavorable. Like those in the business press, these articles contained more unfavorable than favor-

**TABLE 1**  
**FAVORABLE, UNFAVORABLE, AND STEREOTYPIC REFERENCES**  
**BY TYPE OF PUBLICATION**

	MARY CUNNINGHAM			WILLIAM AGEE		
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Stereotypic	Favorable	Unfavorable	Stereotypic
<b>Total</b>	<b>85 (100%)</b>	<b>79 (100%)</b>	<b>46 (100%)</b>	<b>44 (100%)</b>	<b>116 (100%)</b>	<b>8 (100%)</b>
<b>Business Press</b>	<b>15 (17.6%)</b>	<b>34 (43.0%)</b>	<b>8 (17.4%)</b>	<b>14 (31.8%)</b>	<b>74 (63.8%)</b>	<b>4 (50.0%)</b>
<b>General Press</b>	<b>59 (69.4%)</b>	<b>44 (55.7%)</b>	<b>36 (78.3%)</b>	<b>25 (56.8%)</b>	<b>42 (38.2%)</b>	<b>4 (50.0%)</b>
<b>Women's Press</b>	<b>11 (12.9%)</b>	<b>1 (1.3%)</b>	<b>2 (4.3%)</b>	<b>5 (11.4%)</b>	<b>0 (0%)</b>	<b>0 (0%)</b>

The differences in attitudes emerging from the three types of publications also were dramatic. The business press was more critical of both Cunningham and Agee than either the general press or women's magazines. Unfavorable references to Cunningham in the business press outnumbered favorable ones more than two to one (34 unfavorable to 15 favorable). For Agee, the margin was even greater—74 unfavorable references to only 14 favorable, a difference of almost five to one. Although articles from business newspapers and magazines accounted for only 36 percent of the total, they contributed 43 percent of

able references to Agee (42 to 26), but the difference is less overwhelming. The favorable references in this category accounted for 69.4 percent of all favorable references to Mary Cunningham; they also contained 78.3 percent of all stereotypic references in the sample.

The women's magazines accounted for only 5.3 percent of the total number of articles. The most obvious result in this small sample is the 11 to 1 margin of favorable to unfavorable references to Cunningham. This category is also the only one in which favorable references to Agee outnumbered unfavorable ones. Table 2 lists the numbers of

favorable, unfavorable, and stereotypic references to Cunningham and Agee according to the four parts of speech. Adjectives accounted for 111 (or 52.9 percent) of the references to Cunningham, followed, to a much lesser extent, by nouns, adverbs, and verbs. The adjectives used to describe her were more favorable than unfavorable (52 to 28), and over one-fourth of them (31) were stereotypic, mostly having to do with her physical appearance ("attractive," "beautiful," "blonde," "pretty," "stunning") or her age ("young," "thirty-one year old"). The favorable adjectives frequently described her intelligence or her business skill ("precise," "bright," "talented," "capable," "brilliant," "articulate," "energetic," and "practical," for example), while the unfavorable adjectives related to the negative impressions she created (for example, she was described as "disruptive," "calculating," "manipulative," "intimidating," "arrogant," "ruthless," and "sanctimonious").

The adjectives describing Agee

outweighed the negative. Favorable adjectives described his personal manner ("open," "relaxed," "animated," "warm," "humble," "friendly," and "sensitive") or his business manner ("energetic," "dynamic," "progressive," "modern," "principled," and "smart"). On the other hand, he had "maverick" tendencies, thought up "improbable" schemes, and was capable of "despicable" actions. The stereotypic references to him also involved age and physical appearance (e.g., "young," "attractive," and "handsome").

Adjectives were not the primary form of reference to Agee as they were for Cunningham. For him, adverbs (for the most part unfavorable) describing the way he said or did things were most numerous. Although he was given credit for moving "swiftly" in critical business situations, for tackling tough assignments "boldly," and for speaking "candidly," he was far more often criticized for being "opportunistic" oriented, for making remarks

TABLE 2

FAVORABLE, UNFAVORABLE, AND STEREOTYPIC REFERENCES  
BY TYPE OF SPEECH

	MARY CUNNINGHAM				WILLIAM AGEE			
	Favorable	Unfavorable	Stereotypic	Total	Favorable	Unfavorable	Stereotypic	Total
Adjectives	52	28	31	111	25	15	8	48
Adverbs	14	17	—	31	11	44	—	55
Nouns	17	18	12	45	7	11	—	18
Verbs	2	18	3	23	1	46	—	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>168</b>

were more favorable than unfavorable, the only part-of-speech category for him in which the positive

sounding "suspiciously" like excuses, for travelling "extensively" with Cunningham, for acting

"predictably" defensive, for acting "naively," and for showing "remarkably" poor judgment.

Fewer adverbs were used to describe Mary Cunningham's actions, but she was "sharply" ambitious, her upbringing "certainly" was unusual, she made people "particularly" angry, and she was depicted "too angelically" to suit some people. On the other hand, she, too, spoke "candidly," behaved "professionally," and was "awesomely" well prepared for her career.

Cunningham more often was characterized by nouns than Agee was, and the nouns were fairly evenly divided among favorable, unfavorable, and stereotypic. She was most often an "executive," a "strategist," a "trailblazer," and a "planner," but she was also a "barrier," a "power-seeker," and a "protegee-wife." In the stereotypic category, she was described as an "angel," a "schoolgirl," and "Mrs. Agee" or "Agee's wife." The last two are, of course, accurate designations, but they were used in ways that ignored her personal or professional identity. Agee was a "knight," the "model" of a modern manager, a "genius," and a "prodigy," but he was more often an "instigator" and a "loser," who made "blunders," who suffered from "hubris" and "misjudgment," and a man whose "schemes" led to his becoming a "scalp" on Allied's belt.

The largest number of unfavorable references to Agee took the form of verbs characterizing his actions. Despite his having been "heralded" early in his career (the only favorable verb he had), he went on to "argue," to "oust" executives and "extract" their resignations, to "miss" important points, to "infuriate" and "irritate" people, to "scoff," to "complain," to "blast" the media, to "underestimate" his opponents, and finally, he "panicked" and "blew it." Cunningham did not act very

favorably either, judging by the lopsided distributions of verbs for her (2 favorable, 18 unfavorable, 3 stereotypic). She was "victimized" and she did "dare" (used approvingly) to succeed, but more often she "undermined," "flaunted" her power, "monopolized" Agee's time, "bragged," "unsheathed" her ambition, "piped" up at inappropriate times, "qualified" her answers, and finally "tripped herself up."

## Discussion and Conclusions

This content analysis answers the questions raised at the beginning of the study about the attention and attitudes toward Mary Cunningham and William Agee. The numbers of words and the biases they expressed indicate that writers devoted more attention to her than to him but were far more critical of him than of her. In both the business and the general press, the unfavorable references to Agee far outnumbered those that were favorable.

These figures may reflect concern or embarrassment in the business world about what was perceived as inappropriate or embarrassing behavior by one of their own. Concern for appropriateness also may account for the general press' treatment of Agee. In many of those articles, the unfavorable references seemed to imply that he was weak and not as "macho" as we expect board chairmen to be. This impression stems from descriptions of his behavior during the period of Mary Cunningham's last weeks at Bendix and also during the Martin Marietta negotiations two years later. Quoted comments and satiric references to his "wife's" role as an adviser and his seeming "to take comfort" from her presence reinforce the conclusion that Agee was being criticized for not acting in a



stereotypically masculine manner. The women's press, on the other hand, could be expected to applaud non-stereotypic masculine behavior and to approve of a man who promoted and defended a woman executive and regarded her as a key adviser. And indeed, all references to Agee in the women's magazines were favorable.

Similarly, much of the criticism of Mary Cunningham implies that she, too, behaved inappropriately for a woman by being ambitious and determined. On the other hand, writers in the general press (where she was seen more favorably than in the business press) noted that she "never criticized" Bendix, that she "showed more concern for Agee" than he did for himself, and that she took the "old-fashioned" way out when she resigned from Bendix. The frequent descriptions of her as Mrs. Agee or as Agee's wife in situations where it would have been equally if not more appropriate to refer to her own name and professional status, suggest a desire to have her fit into a more traditional role. Here, too, the preponderance of favorable references to her in the women's press would suggest approval of her attempts to overcome the limitations business and society are seen as imposing on women.

The analysis by parts of speech bolsters this conclusion that traditional gender-role expectations were a factor in the treatment Cunningham and Agee received. Adjectives outnumbered all other references to Cunningham by an enormous margin (111 adjectives to 99 nouns, adverbs, and verbs combined or 67.4 percent of the total). Agee, on the other hand, was characterized by more adverbs than adjectives (55 to 48) and by almost as many verbs as adjectives (47 to 48). If we consider how parts of speech are commonly defined and used, these differences become

significant. An adjective normally is employed to modify or describe a noun, which usually is defined as a word denoting a person, place, or thing. An adverb frequently qualifies or describes a verb, which usually is defined as a word expressing action. Relating these definitions to the coverage of Cunningham and Agee, we see that *she* was most often characterized by adjectives—descriptors of a *person*, while *he* was frequently characterized by adverbs—descriptors of *how* he acted—or by verbs—descriptors of his *actions*. In other words, Mary Cunningham was praised or criticized for what she *was*, while William Agee was criticized, for the most part, for what he *did*. Even when his actions were being criticized, the man was depicted as an actor and a doer, while the woman was depicted as an object would be—something that is looked at and described.

These data on the press coverage of Mary Cunningham and William Agee in general, as well as the more specific analyses of language used in that coverage, do not, in themselves, suggest a deliberate attempt by the writers to perpetuate stereotypes or to keep women out of the executive suite. They do, however, demonstrate how deeply ingrained some of our attitudes and values are. To the extent that newspapers and magazines reinforce or influence social values, as well as reflect and report on them, their editors and writers need to be aware of the intricate ways in which language choices are a part of those activities.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Peter W. Bernstein, "Upheaval at Bendix," *Fortune*, November 3, 1980, pp. 45-53; Art Buchwald, "On Mergerer's Row," *Los Angeles Times*

syndicate, appearing in the *Washington Post* and other newspapers on October 15, 1982; Judith Coburn, "Mary Cunningham: So Successful She Had To Fail," *Mademoiselle*, January 1981, p. 24; Lisa Birnbach, "I'm Not Going To Let Them Change Me," *Parade*, April 25, 1982, pp. 4-8; and Gail Sheehy, "Troubled Childhood Drove Mary To Power," Chicago Tribune-New York News syndicate, appearing in the *Pittsburgh Press* and other newspapers on October 26, 1980.

<sup>2</sup>John C. Merrill, "How *Time* Stereotyped Three U.S. Presidents," *Journalism Quarterly*, 42 (Autumn 1965), 563-70.

<sup>3</sup>Merrill, p. 564.

<sup>4</sup>Merrill, pg. 564.

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