

News reporters take a beating in speech by Mary Cunningham

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

Mary Cunningham again was a media event last week when a record crowd of nearly 3,000 people — including 50 news people — turned out to hear her attack the media.

The former Bendix executive, now a vice-president for strategic planning at Joseph E. Seagram & Sons Inc. and an executive vice-president of its wine division, spoke at a meeting to the Women's Economic Club in Cobo Hall.

"There were more press people there than when we hosted (GM board chairman) Roger Smith," said Elizabeth Kovach, who handles club reservations.

Cunningham resigned from Bendix in October 1980, saying intense scrutiny from newspaper and television reporters interfered with her job performance.

WHILE SHE pounced on the media for linking her romantically with Bendix chief William Agee, now her fiancé, her punching bags attentively listened.

"ABC was interviewing her for a segment on '20/20,' and she was being taped for an upcoming interview by Barbara Walters," Kovach added.

Reporters from the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Associated Press, United Press International, Monthly Detroit, local papers and television stations attended.

The Detroit Free Press, which took a special beating from Cunningham, had at least five reporters and two photographers on hand.

MENTIONING no names, Cunningham, 30, referred to a September 1980 Free Press story that she said got her national attention. The story reported Agee's remarks about his relationship with her at a meeting of Bendix employees.

At that meeting, she said, Agee spoke for 65 minutes on

the company's new strategic plans and six minutes on top-level management changes, including her promotion to executive vice-president.

"Here's where the tragedy of this plot begins to unfold," Cunningham told the group.

"There are two rival (daily) papers in this community. . . One paper (The News) reported a major business story detailing the new strategy. . . The other paper (Free Press) ran with a now-famous headline, 'Boss Slaps Down Office Gossip, Denies Romantic Link,' she said.

The "romantic link" story swept across the country, igniting the myriad of stories which Cunningham called "irresponsible media coverage."

CUNNINGHAM SAID that if she had been a man, her rapid advancement up the Bendix career ladder would not have been subjected to so much public scrutiny.

"Because there seems to be no norms for people to rest their minds on when they see a woman moving up in the male preserve, they tend to fall back on the shop-worn assumption that she must have gotten there through her sexual charm," Cunningham said.

"Sometimes, the burden of proof is forced on her — even if it means the impossible task of disproving a negative."

"The urge to sensationalize, to imply more than the simple facts indicate and to nourish the public thirst for scandal must be very tempting. But it also tends to obscure the truth and distort public perception."

CUNNINGHAM'S audience — including many members of the press corps — were spotted responding to her speech with applause and a standing ovation.

Cunningham was a winner with those who she said attempted to destroy her: she got more attention and more coverage than U.S. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who spoke a few days earlier to the Economic Club of Detroit.



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— Mary Cunningham

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