Chapter Twenty-one

When in 1969 I became publisher of the Post as well as president of the company, my plate was fuller than ever. I had partly worked myself into the job but not, except for rare occasions, taken hold. I had acquired some sense of business but still relied on others more than most company presidents did. One article written about me that appeared fully five years after I'd gone to work said, "Mrs. Graham accepts her responsibilities much more often than she asserts her authority." That was true; I didn't always take charge or handle my relationships with people throughout the company in the coolest or best way. My expectations far exceeded my accomplishments. In fact, the years from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, rich and full as they were, were depressing for me in many ways.

I seemed to be carrying inadequacy as baggage. When I thought about my uncertainty and nervousness, a scene from the first musical comedy I'd ever seen, The Vagabond King, kept recurring to me. There is a moment when the suddenly enthroned vagabond, appearing for the first time in royal robes, slowly and anxiously descends the great stairs, tensely eyeing on both sides the rows of archers with their drawn bows and inscrutable faces. I still felt like a pretender to the throne, very much on trial. I felt I was always taking an exam and would fail if I missed a single answer; a direct question about something like Newsweek's newsstand circulation would flummox me completely.

What most got in the way of my doing the kind of job I wanted to do was my insecurity. Partly this arose from my particular experience, but to the extent that it stemmed from the narrow way women's roles were defined, it was a trait shared by most women in my generation. We had been brought up to believe that our roles were to be wives and mothers, educated to think that we were put on earth to make men happy and comfortable and to do the same for our children.

I adopted the assumption of many of my generation that women were intellectually inferior to men, that we were not capable of governing, leading, managing anything but our homes and our children. Once married, we were confined to running houses, providing a smooth atmosphere, dealing with children, supporting our husbands. Pretty soon this kind of thinking—indeed, this kind of life—took its toll: most of us became somehow inferior. We grew less able to keep up with what was happening in the world. In a group we remained largely silent, unable to participate in conversations and discussions. Unfortunately, this incapacity often produced in women—as it did in me—a diffuse way of talking, an inability to be concise, a tendency to ramble, to start at the end and work backwards, to overexplain, to go on for too long, to apologize.

Women traditionally also have suffered—and many still do—from an exaggerated desire to please, a syndrome so instilled in women of my generation that it inhibited my behavior for many years, and in ways still does. Although at the time I didn't realize what was happening, I was unable to make a decision that might displease those around me. For years, whatever directive I may have issued ended with the phrase "if it's all right with you." If I thought I'd done anything to make someone unhappy, I'd agonize. The end result of all this was that many of us, by middle age, arrived at the state we were trying most to avoid: we bored our husbands, who had done their fair share in helping reduce us to this condition, and they wandered off to younger, greener pastures.

When I first went to work, I was still handicapped with the old assumptions and was operating as though they were written in stone. When I started my job, I was "inferior" to the men with whom I was working. I had no business experience, no management experience, and little knowledge of the governmental, economic, political, or other matters with which we dealt. I truly felt like Samuel Johnson's description of a woman minister—"a woman preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all." Since I regarded myself as inferior, I failed to distinguish between, on the one hand, male condescension because I was a woman and, on the other hand, a valid view that the only reason I had my job was the good luck of my birth and the bad luck of my husband's death.

Being a woman in control of a company—even a small private company, as ours was then—was so singular and surprising in those days that I necessarily stood out. In 1963, and for the first several years of my working life, my situation was certainly unique. Even at my own company, there were no women managers and few women professionals—and probably no women within four levels of me. The Post was not an anomaly; rather, this was typical of the times. The business world was essentially closed to women. At least through most of the 1960s, I basically lived in a man's world, hardly speaking to a woman all day except to the secretaries.
The day the Women's Wear piece appeared, I was a little worried. Elsie Carver, the longtime editor and publisher, and I had worked closely together for years. She was concerned about the reaction it might cause, so I decided to go to the office and talk to her. She was very understanding and agreed that the piece was necessary.

In the meantime, I continued to work on the project. I had worked with women's issues for many years, and I was familiar with the challenges they faced. I wanted to bring attention to the problems that women faced in the workplace, and I believed that by doing so, we could make a difference.

Early in 1956, I was asked to speak at the Women's City Club of Cleveland. Someone there had written me. The reaction to the speech was very positive, and I was encouraged to write a book about the subject. I began to research and write, and the result was "Women's Wear Daily." The book was published in 1958 and became an instant bestseller.

Even more revealing of my old-fashioned attitudes was an interview I did with "Women's Wear Daily" as late as 1958. Overall, the piece reads perfectly today. It reflects the image of a woman, so I was honestly not interested in that subject. Later I find to adjust. It's interesting to see the differences in the treatment of women over the years. I think being a woman may have been a drawback for the job, but it also gave me a unique perspective.

"I think being a woman may have been a drawback for the job, but it also gave me a unique perspective. I have worked with women and men, and I have seen the differences in the way they approach work.

"I have been fortunate to work with women who have been open and honest about their careers. They have been willing to share their experiences, and I have learned a lot from them.

"In the world today, men are more used to being in charge. But I think it's important to listen to both men and women and to understand their perspectives.

"I think the difference between men and women is not in their abilities, but in their approaches to work. Men tend to be more assertive, while women are more collaborative. I think it's important to blend these approaches in order to be successful.

"In the end, I think it's important to remember that we are all human beings, and we all have the same desires and goals. We just approach them in different ways.
men looked right through you?" Peter replied. "Well, that's the reason."

Oddly, I was still insecure enough to let this pass.

Each time I was the only woman in a room full of men, I suffered lest I appear stupid or ignorant. And yet I have to admit that, as much as I may have been disappointed by being the only woman in most of the meetings I attended, as time went on there was part of me that quite liked it. I actually confessed to a friend at the time that "it's spoiling—and fun—to be the first in the door."

An extreme example of my acceptance of traditional notions of men's and women's roles and realms was a frivolous but basic one. In Washington and elsewhere where large, social dinners were given, men and women automatically separated after eating, the men usually remaining at the dining-room table discussing serious matters over brandy and cigars while the women retreated to the living room or the hostess's bedroom to powder their noses and gossip, mostly about children and houses—"women's" interests, as they were then considered. I remember hearing a story that once Cissy Patterson, on being herded off with the other women after dinner, said to her hostess, "Let's hurry through this. I have no household problems and my daughter is grown." But she, too, accepted this ancient custom, as did I. Long after I had gone to work and was engaged in discussing political, business, or world affairs with many of these same men by day, at night, after dinner, I would mindlessly take myself off with the rest of the women, even in my own house. Finally, one night at Joe Alsop's, something snapped. I realized that I had worked all day, participated in an editorial-issue lunch, and was not only deeply involved in but was actually interested in what was going on in the world. Yet I was being asked to spend up to an hour waiting to rejoin the men. That night at Joe's—he was especially guilty of keeping the men around his table—I told him I was sure he would understand if I quietly left when the women were dismissed. Far from understanding, Joe was upset. Defensively, he insisted that the separation didn't last a full hour but only long enough for the men to go to the bathroom. I maintained that that was nonsense, that I liked early evenings, that I looked forward to my reading, and, further, that I wasn't trying to tell him what to do but only stating what I wanted to do. Joe couldn't accept the idea of my leaving and promised that if I stayed he would let everyone—men and women—remain at the table.

My action didn't come as the result of some major philosophical stance; rather, it simply occurred to me that I could use that after-dinner hour better by going home and reading the early edition of the paper. But clearly my working experience had at last combined with the influence of the increasingly strong women's movement.

I had had no intention of starting a revolution, but my action did in-deed trigger a minor social coup, as news of my innocent suggestion spread. Because I was regarded as a conservative on these social issues, my stance was particularly effective. The illogic of expecting women to leave while men held meaningful discussions became obvious, and the practice gradually broke up all over town.

There was no single dramatic moment that altered my views about women; rather, I just began to focus on the real issues surrounding the women's movement. However slow I was to learn—no doubt much too slow to suit many women—I finally became increasingly aware and involved. Looking back, I can't understand, except in the context of the times, why I wasn't quicker to recognize the problems.

Thinking things through with Meg Greenfield helped a great deal. She and I came at women's issues from different perspectives but with surprisingly similar attitudes. Meg had "made it" before women's liberation—in her early days at the Post she had a sign on her office door that said, "If liberated, I will not serve"—but she faced many of the same prejudices in her office that I did in mine. We tried to articulate our ideas together. She once added a P.S. to a note about something else: "I have been trying to work out a position—any position—on women's lib but I fear that even moving toward the spirit of [her] thing somewhat, I am irredemably Uncle Tom. Do you suppose there's a book one should read?"

(We did indeed get a bunch of books, including The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir, and read them and improved our attitude.) She went on thinking about these matters and heartily agreed with what was probably the first Post editorial comment on women's issues in this era. In August of 1969, under the title "Not Such a Long Way, Baby," we wrote about a sportswriter, Elinor Kaine, who had been barred from the press box at some football stadium. Unable to cover the game, she had taken her case to court. The Post editorial read: "[D]espite Virginia Slims, few 'babies,' as the TV commercial would have you believe, have come a long way." After discussing salary and other inequalities, the editorial noted, "The women's liberation movement, which began a few years ago as a fragile feminine caucusc, is spreading," and said that "countless women who were previously resigned to their roles—in this case, often as slaves or slaves to the male ego—now see that schools, businesses, churches and government all exploit or oppress women in some way." The editorial—written by a liberated man—suggested legal and social remedies but concluded that "perhaps we can begin with the ultra-radical notion that a woman is a human being."

My friendship with Gloria Steinem was also an important influence in
my thinking. Being younger, she had been shaped by the 1950s, a very different time from my own frame of reference. I had watched the burgeoning women's movement, of which she was a distinguished leader, from afar at first and was put off by the pioneering feminists who necessarily, I now suspect, took extreme positions to make their crucial point about the essential equality of women. I couldn't understand militancy and disliked the kind of bra-burning symbolism that appeared to me like man-hating. I remember being repelled by a New York magazine cover showing young Abby Rockefeller with a belligerent raised fist to illustrate a story on feminism. This kind of thing made me overlook the real issues and think that there was something wrong with the whole movement.

As time passed, Gloria, more than any other individual, changed my mind-set and helped me grasp what the leaders of the movement—and even the extremists—were talking about. I remember her first efforts to talk with me seriously about the issues. My response was, "No, thanks, that's not for me." She persisted, however. I recall her encouraging me to throw off some of the myths associated with my old-style thinking. She said, "That's General Motors passing through our womb—you know, it goes from our fathers to our sons. But there is this kind of authentic self in there that is a guide if it's not too squelched, and if we're not too scared to listen to it." I was pretty certain that whatever authentic self I may have had had been pretty well squelched, but Gloria kept telling me that if I came to understand what the women's movement was all about it would make my life much better. In time it inevitably dawned on me, and how right she was! Later, when Gloria came to me for funds to start up Ms. magazine, I put up $20,000 for seed money to help her get going.

More effective even than Gloria was my personal experience in the workplace and the cumulative effect of the many rooms into which I walked, boards on which I sat, meetings I attended, as the only woman. I saw endless examples within our own company of how women were viewed. Both the Post and Newsweek certainly operated in the old ways, assuming that white men were the chosen ones to run the business and edit the news. Both organizations were totally male-oriented on the business, advertising, and production sides, and predominantly so on the editorial side. To much too great an extent, I accepted this as the way the world worked.

Liz Peer was one of the exceptions who not only survived but thrived. Having just graduated from Connecticut College, she applied to Newsweek in 1959 and was told not even to bother if what she had in mind was a writing position. She persisted, however, and took a job on the mail desk as "Elliott Girls." Liz was the only woman given a writing tryout at Newsweek between the years 1961 and 1969. (Among the talents that Newsweek overlooked were Ellen Goodman, Nora Ephron, Susan Brownmiller, Elizabeth Drew, and Jane Bryant Quinn, all of whom served the magazine in the traditional woman's role of researcher.) Liz Peer finally became a writer in 1962 and a correspondent in the Paris bureau in 1964. She said later that, when she hesitantly asked if the promotion to the Paris job involved a raise, Oz replied indignantly, "What do you mean? Think of the honor we are paying you." She has told me that what she found most destructive about minority-group psychology "is that one comes to share the conviction of the majority: that one is less able, less intelligent, less educable, less worthy of responsibility." My sentiments, exactly.

To my surprise, all this was becoming very much a part of me. Though I was still simplistic in my thinking, I was beginning to understand the seriousness and complexity of the issue. Obviously I was in a good position not only to think about the problems of women in the workplace but to do something about them. As I began to understand more, I also began to acknowledge my responsibilities. I did try—in some small ways, some larger—to do something about raising the visibility of women and increasing the sensitivity toward matters of particular concern to them.

As a manager, I was aware of the issues but had no clear idea how to lean on male-chauvinist managers to make changes. I felt that I and other women in management positions had a special duty to bury the old prejudices—first by refusing to accept them, and then by refuting them wherever and whenever we encountered them. Attitudes needed to be modified on both sides. Women had accepted the dubious assumptions and myths about themselves for much too long. And men had to be helped to break out of the assumptions of which they, too, were victims.

I worked hard to educate the men around me, to raise their consciousness, even as I myself was in the early stages of consciousness-raising. I circulated among the executives at the company an article that appeared in New York magazine, "The Female Job Ghetto." I wrote a note to our personnel director after I had received a copy of a memo he'd sent around introducing some new people at the Post, pointing out what I viewed as a subtle example of bias. In his memo, this head of personnel had referred to all the men by their last names and the women by their first names. "Here is an example of the need for more sensitivity," I wrote. "Uniformity of either kind is OK. I prefer first names throughout. Although this seems superficial, attitudes which it reveals are not. No doubt it could have been written by Mary—but she works for Jones."

At the company I often received requests to listen to women's complaints. Else Carper told me of repeatedly receiving mediocré assignments. Meryl Secrest from "Style" came to tell me of always being assigned women or wives to interview and never men. After our talk, I
wrote her that I'd always be there to listen to her views but I stood by the editors: "I think editors have to decide issues such as how and where to use reporters." I fear I didn't lean on the editors to change their ways.

When *Newsweek* was looking for a "Back of the Book" editor, I suggested the able art critic of *The New York Times*, Aline Saarinen, whom the editors dismissed out of hand, condescendingly explaining that it would be out of the question to have a woman. Their arguments were that the closing nights were too late, the end-of-the-week pressure too great, the physical demands of the job too tough. I am embarrassed to admit that I simply accepted their line of reasoning passively.

Although I was head of a company, I had a hard time making change happen under the white males running things. I think I made some small inroads, however. Ben and I were always talking about the language used in the paper. In 1970, which was "the year of the woman," I was one of five women admitted for the first time to the Washington chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, the professional journalism society. I spoke at the dinner on the night of our induction and talked about the way we referred to women in the newspaper, joking that the headline the *Post's* copy desk might put on the story of my membership in this organization would be "Newsmen's Frat Taps Working Grandma."

Indeed, only the week before, Ben had agreed to several requests made by a committee of concerned women reporters at the *Post* and had sent a memo around the newsroom on unconscious bias creeping into news articles. He cautioned that "Words like 'divorced,' 'grandmother,' 'blonde' (or 'brunette'), or 'housewife' should be avoided in all stories," corresponding words wouldn't be used if a man were involved. His memo continued:

Words like "vivacious," "pert," "dimpled," or "cute" have long since become clichés, and are droppable on that count alone, without hampering our efforts to get good descriptions into the paper. ... Stories involving the achievement of women ... should be written without a trace of condescension.

Feelings about women's issues had slowly gathered steam, and by the early 1970s they exploded. Women in professional situations began to assert themselves through lawsuits in behalf of equal opportunity. In March of 1970, forty-six women at *Newsweek* filed a complaint with the EEOC claiming discrimination. Not coincidentally, it was the same day that *Newsweek's* first cover story on the women's movement, titled "Women in Revolt," appeared. I'm sure the frustration of these women was fueled by the fact that there was only one woman writer at *Newsweek* at the time and she was judged too junior for the assignment, so a free-lancer, Helen Duydar, the wife of one of *Newsweek*'s writers, Peter Goldman, was hired to write the cover.

I was away at the time and got a phone call from Fritz Beebe and Oz Elliott together, telling me about the complaint. "Which side am I supposed to be on?" I asked— to which Fritz quickly responded, "This is serious. It isn't a joke." I hadn't thought it was a joke, nor had I meant my question to be. We then went on to discuss what legal response to take, since the women had hired Eleanor Holmes Norton to represent them.

When I got home and was more involved in the action, I think I became too embattled as someone who was part of management. As the situation grew tenser, fueled by the litigation, I wrote a reader defensively, "I agree that the tradition of newsweeklies has tended to appear to discriminate against women. We were making plans to expand opportunities for women— and are continuing to do so. I think we could have done so better and more easily had the group at *Newsweek* discussed this with us before they filed their legal complaint." Of course, I can see in hindsight that they probably had discussed the issues repeatedly with people at a lower level and unbeknownst to me. Eventually we started to remedy the situation—but not enough. By August 1970, we reached a memorandum of understanding, but two years later we had a whole new round when the editors were accused of not living up to the understanding. This time we were more successful. I don't believe it was bad faith that made us fail the first time but lack of understanding.

The *Post*, too, was sued. In 1972, after earlier complaints had gone largely unnoticed—and little action taken—fifty-nine women at the paper, clearly dissatisfied with management's response, signed a letter that they sent me, Ben, Phil Geyelin, and Howard Simons. The memo let the company's own statistics speak for themselves in terms of our stated policy at the *Post* "to make the equality and dignity of women completely and instinctively meaningful." The women noted that the *Post* had actually gone backwards from the time that policy statement had been issued two years previously. Since the new "Style" section had replaced the old women's pages, women had lost four jobs. Besides me, Meg was the only woman in upper management at the paper.

At one point during all this, Ben appointed a committee in the newsroom to report to him on what to do about equal employment. He endorsed the committee's report, recommending the creation of several new jobs for women and for blacks, who were experiencing a similar yet different bias. I responded rather stodgily but not unreasonably, saying it all needed greater care:

The tendency of white males to accept other white males coming in the transom, while they don't recruit Blacks and women is a
tendency that isn’t going to be modified by the sudden compensation of... additional people.

It’s just the way to do it wrong again, I fear, because it takes time and effort and a change of attitudes to do it right.

Whatever we decided to do, I felt we should commit an equivalent effort to the business side of the paper, where I thought even more remediation was needed than in the city room. We wound up asking Elsie Carper, who had put forth the idea of a petition instead of a lawsuit earlier in the year, to become head of personnel to hire more women and more blacks, and she made a big impact on the paper with her hires.

Like all business and editorial companies, in fact all white- and male-dominated institutions, we had a lot to learn in this period. At both the Post and Newsweek there was a great deal right and a great deal wrong about some of our procedures and some of our responses to the issues. Prior to the late 1960s, our intention had been good but our accomplishments only so-so. Phil had encouraged black recruiting and he had hired a black reporter, but no system of goals and how to achieve them was ever put in place. When the 1970s brought infusions of blacks and women, neither the Post nor Newsweek at first dealt with the new employees with much sensitivity, understanding, or skill, but this was also true of almost every organization in mainstream America. Adding to the problem was that our beginning efforts to hire “qualified” women and minorities were carried out inadequately. When saddled with inadequate talent or failures whether women or blacks, we didn’t know either how to work with them to bring them along or how to let them go.

Eventually things improved dramatically at both places, but without the suits and without the laws adopted by the country, this would have happened even more slowly. My own reactions to these suits were mixed: I felt that some were unfair and some were not. But you always get pushed when things become confrontational, and that is often to the good. Ironically, at both publications we were doing better vis-à-vis women and blacks than were most other papers and magazines, where there weren’t even enough women or minorities to confront the management.

Throughout all the turmoil over women’s and other minorities’ issues, Meg was my valued adviser. In the middle of the suits and EEOC complaints and various battles, she wrote me a stunning memo speaking against the idea of quotas:

I am doing this rather pretentious thing of sending you a memo because I feel so strongly that it will be a mistake—and that it will not be a small mistake.

Everybody... agrees that we must do far more than we have to bring equity and opportunity to blacks and to women at the Post, and that we will be not just a fairer employer but also a better paper for doing so. Nobody, so far as I know (including those who are hospitable to the percentage idea), is particularly enthusiastic or even happy about adopting a so-called “quota” system. As I understand it one principal argument in favor is that such a system should now be imposed because it is evidently the only way in which we can make ourselves take action or get some of the footdraggers on the move.

... Are we really to concede that we cannot make ourselves do what we agree is both desirable and fair except by a technique that strips from us the power to act on our best instincts and makes us subject to automatic imperatives that rest in some sort of contract or agreement?

... These are, of course, practical concerns. There are, in my judgment, concerns of principle too, which are at least as important, perhaps more so... For we are moving, almost imperceptibly, from a concern to eradicate and compensate for the effects of past discrimination through an awareness that we cannot be entirely “color blind” in doing so to an acquiescence in the re-establishment of race (and sex) as legitimate criteria in determining the way we treat people...

“Forgive the melodrama,” Meg concluded, “but I should like to think that The Washington Post will be known as one of those rare institutions that perceived the enormous cost of putting sex and race back into law, that resisted the temptation of fashion and convenience—that had the foresight to say no.”

Beyond the Workplace, in the early 1970s there were also many unenlightened, regressive sanctuaries of male supremacy, among them, in Washington, the National Press Club, the Gridiron Club, and the Federal City Council. The Gridiron held an annual dinner at which the members, who were journalists and editors, performed political skits and songs of a slightly Princeton Triangle quality for an audience of government leaders, business heads, and other well-known people, as well as newspaper people from all over the country. Naturally, it was an all-male affair. Here, actually, as in some other arenas, it was easier for a black to be accepted than for a woman: the columnist Carl Rowan was already a Gridiron member.

By this time, women reporters had begun picketing the annual dinner and giving counter-Gridiron parties and urging government officials not to attend. The club was feeling the pressure and knew it had to change,
and in 1972 the leaders decided to invite a few women as guests. Nineteen were asked, of whom I was one. Others included Mrs. Nixon and Mrs. Agnew, Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Representatives Shirley Chisholm, Martha Griffiths, and Edith Green, Senator Margaret Chase Smith, Margaret Mead, Barbara Tuchman, and Coretta Scott King.

Controversy over the invitations immediately arose. Mrs. Chisholm responded in a press release headlined “Guess Who’s Not Coming to Dinner?” Several men had also pointedly declined the invitation that year including Senators (and then presidential candidates) George McGovern and Edmund Muskie. Alice Longworth, on the other hand, had said she wouldn’t miss it for anything, adding, “Only real illness could make me miss the dinner. I’ll have to be too ill to stand if I don’t go.”

My first reaction was that after all these years of being on the outside I was excited to be invited, and I was all set to accept when I received a letter signed by many of the women on the editorial side of the paper and from other papers, asking me not to go until the club accepted a woman as a member. But there was no opening at the club at this time, and the gesture of an invitation seemed to me a beginning. Besides which, I really wanted to go. However, I asked several of these women to dinner at my house to discuss the issue. Among those who came were Meg, Marilyn Berger, Liz Peer, Sarah Booth Conroy, and Elise Carper. They made many valid arguments, but the clincher belonged to Sally Quinn, who said, “If a country club excluded you for being a Jew but said they’d like to have you for dinner, would you go?” That cemented my decision to regret the invitation, which I did.

Meg and I were planning to have dinner together on the night of the big event. She had worked late, and as she left the Post’s building, a picket line was already forming across the street at the Statler Hotel. Placards read: “Write On, Sisters,” “I’m a Member of the No-Iron Club—Support a Permanent Free Press,” and “This Is the Last Supper.” Meg saw that Judith Martin—now “Miss Manners”—was already walking the picket line, pushing a baby buggy. She called to describe the scene to me, and we—both too self-conscious to picket—decided that we had to take a look at the white-tie-attired men and the few invited ladies who had accepted make their way through the gauntlet.

Thinking we’d be less conspicuous, we hopped into Meg’s beat-up Mustang rather than my more identifiable car and began our cruise, trying to be as casual as possible, circling the block, driving past the hotel to see what we were missing. With all of the media coverage, we were worried about the cameras’ catching us in what we knew would be a dreadful photo and could already imagine the caption—but we couldn’t resist. So Meg drove and I hunched down as best I could, trying to avoid being seen, while Meg tried to shield the whole car by keeping us partially hidden behind a bus. We had a hilarious perspective on this scene of limousines, white tie and tails, the baby buggy, and the picketers. After many circulations and several sightings, we went back to my house and had dinner and a great laugh, satisfied to have had it both ways. It was not until 1975 that the Gridiron changed its policy and admitted women; that was the first year I attended.

The Federal City Council was another case in point. Ironically, it had been created in large part by Phil, and many Post executives had been or were members. I was only vaguely aware of my not being included until one day when I was invited to go along with council members on a tour of the District’s subway system, then being constructed. As I looked around our group, it dawned on me that not only were there no other women present, but there were none on the council. I was absolutely sure that there had been women on it when Phil founded it, because I remembered at least one. I asked what had happened and only then realized that no one had ever asked me to join. I remember being more indignant than embarrassed—a more helpful reaction for furthering the goals of the women’s movement—and insisting that someone make sure the head of the council knew that either they must get some women in the organization or the Post was going to write about it. Very soon after our tour I was invited to join, together with a few other women.

Further proof that much of what I was hearing from women everywhere was seeping into me and affecting my thinking was a letter I drafted to Paul Miller, then chairman of the Gannett Company and later head of the Associated Press for many years. I raised a problem I felt was serious enough to bring up at the next membership meeting of the AP—the composition of the board, which was not only all-male and all-white but also business- rather than editorial-oriented. I said I would be personally reluctant to continue to participate in meetings or social occasions that perpetuated such a state of affairs. Obviously I felt strongly, but in the end my native caution took over and the letter was never sent. I regret now that it wasn’t. Much later I myself got elected to the board—the first woman—and served three terms. Everything, including the staff that came to meetings, was still the same—male and white. Although I repeatedly brought up the subject when I was on the board, it was generally treated as a cute joke, despite the association’s having been sued by its women members—a suit which I, in vain, told them they ought to settle. It took many more years for the situation to begin to change.

I always thought things would grow better with time, that the atmosphere would become more welcoming of women, particularly when there were more women involved and less notice was given to any single one of us, but it didn’t happen that way. For one thing, there never were that many more of us—and still aren’t, at least not at the highest levels.
The issues relating to women were on my mind constantly throughout these years. Though it took me a long time to throw off some of my early and ingrained assumptions, I did come to understand the importance of the basic problems of equality in the workplace, upward mobility, salary equity, and, more recently, child care. What the women's movement eventually did for me personally was to help me sort out my thinking. Most important to me was not the central message of the movement—that women were equal—but that women had a right to choose which life-style suited them. We all had a right to a frame of reference other than that we were put on earth to catch a man, hold him, and please him. Eventually I came to realize that, if women understood this and acted on it, things would be better for men as well as for women.

Ironically, it was during these particular years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, while I was anguishing over so many personal and professional matters, that my own profile was beginning to rise. To my surprise, I was suddenly written about. Essentially it had started with the piece in Vogue by Arthur Schlesinger. Later that same year, 1967, I was on the cover of Business Week, and still later in the year appeared on the cover of the Washingtonian, profiled flatteringly by Judith Viorst. This was a completely novel and strange experience. Even my mother was impressed and asked for a dozen copies.

I was unused to being interviewed and very self-conscious about these articles. In fact, I usually refused requests for interviews, cooperating only if I thought it would help the company. I steadfastly refused to do television interviews, on the grounds of protecting my privacy. I didn't want that kind of visibility, but I also felt awkward and nervous about doing it and wouldn't have been any good at it if I had tried.

Yet, despite my apprehensions, it was pleasant having these articles be so positive. And, indeed, I was doing some things right. For instance, I formed the habit early, and have kept it up to the present, of answering letters from readers, whether of praise or criticism. People need to feel that they can react against what is published or aired and that someone is listening to their suggestions or complaints. Because of my scrupulous impulse to respond, to explain, even to soothe, there is a paper trail of correspondence from these years which reflects the growing pressures and tensions of the times. Mostly, my top priority was to back the editors and reporters and defend them from assault, especially if the complaint came from somewhere in the government, while at the same time trying to protect the company from undue heat.

Sometimes it was as difficult to deal with a reporter or an editor as with an outsider. Editors tend to develop what Ben calls a “defensive crouch”—a natural reaction that has its virtues, because it's often assumed in support of reporters. They get so many unwarranted complaints that they become hardened, until they will sometimes react defensively against even the most persuasive arguments. As a result, they need to be very certain that they're not rigid, but instead carefully for those comments and complaints that are on target, and responding to them constructively. Not surprisingly, all of us publishers and editors react as violently as the public does when it's our ox that's gored. I know that reporters who have never been written about are not sensitive enough to the feelings of the people about whom they're writing—often I wish that those writers who seem to delight in savaging their targets could experience it themselves sometime. Having endured my fair share of savagery, I try harder to monitor our fairness and to be sympathetic to rational complaints from readers.

At times I've had to defend things I didn't like or think were fair or in good taste. For instance, my life would have been a lot simpler had Nicholas von Hoffman not appeared in the paper. I remember one column in which he said, in effect, that all used-car dealers were crooks. This piece resulted in a very expensive advertising boycott of the paper and lost us a large amount of money. I recall throwing up my hands at one point and writing a reader that I agreed that a particular column of Nick's shouldn't have gotten into the paper. Nick did have extreme views, some of which were distasteful to me as well as to some of our readers, but he also had a gifted voice and represented a certain segment of the population that needed to be heard. Almost alone among American journalists at the time, von Hoffman was telling us what was in the minds of the young who felt dispossessed and unrepresented by the so-called establishment press. I firmly believed that he belonged in the Post.

I also took a lot of heat over the years because of Herblock's cartoons. They inspired a great deal of mail, and I was constantly defending him. Herb has been one of the great—and most relentless—assets of the Post for half a century. His cartoons are so powerful that they've sometimes made me gasp. His strong feelings come through in every drawing. I would try to reassure furious readers by reminding them, “The nature of cartoons is to exaggerate to make a point.” I also often reminded readers that a great cartoonist is an artist, with all the temperament that that implies. Herblock is undeniably a great cartoonist, and as I wrote to one reader, “It seems to us that he has therefore earned a certain license. He could not continue to be as good as he is if he were subjected to censorship or control by those who do not share his particular genius, by somebody constantly telling him to be more careful, to pull his punches, to do
it some other way.” To another reader, I summed up the situation by saying: “You either live with him or without him—the latter of which is unthinkable to me.”

The war in Vietnam and the Post’s and Newsweek’s position on the war also caused a great deal of dismay on the part of readers—naturally, from both ends of the political spectrum. Mostly I tried to explain our stance and to remind readers that we didn’t dictate government policy or unduly influence anyone. On April 4, 1968, by which time the paper had turned away from its largely supportive position on the war, and after LBJ had announced that he would not be a candidate for re-election, I wrote a Post reader, “We simply believe the policy of automatic escalation had been tried and had failed. We suggested rethinking our policy in Viet Nam. I can only deduce that the President too has come to this conclusion. Neither of us, I am sure, did this under any subversive influence.”

In 1970, the Post—only the second paper to do so—started employing an ombudsman, whose job it is to receive and review complaints about what appears in the paper. Even corrections can be troublesome, particularly when attempting to rectify some egregious error only compounds the original problem. In a sense, we in the media are all ombudsmen, trying to lessen the feeling some people have that they are helpless and without hope of a hearing.

Most of all, what I know I did well in these years was to care about the company. I took an inordinate interest in all that we did, an interest that was once described accurately (if in a sexist way) as “compounded of equal parts of house mother and cheerleader.” I tried to create an atmosphere that gave people the freedom to do their jobs, an environment in which good ideas would always be heard. I think I shared the highs and the lows, the failures as well as the successes.

And successes there certainly were. We were barreling forward on the news side and enjoying some success editorially in both publications and at the stations. There is nothing as good for morale as a few victories and the feeling of progress that comes from innovative ideas. Ours was still modest progress, but it was visible.