

Here's to You, Mrs. Robinson

Since her marriage to American Express's chairman, Jim Robinson, Linda Robinson has become the most powerful woman on Wall Street. Her P.R. clients include Texaco, Time Warner, and Michael Milken, and she spins a social web that includes the Perelmans, the Kravises, and the Kissingers. As Amex scrapes to save Shearson, people are asking if she can protect her most important client, her husband. EDWARD KLEIN reports

Linda Robinson dashes through the doors of the "21" Club, a place that has again found favor with the barons of American business. The hatcheck counter is three-deep with wives—some trophy, some not—shedding their bulky furs. But Linda Robinson travels alone and costless, a sign that she is so tightly scheduled she must be whisked from wheel to deal in her own chauffeur-driven car.

Until recently, hardly anyone had heard of her, but in the past year or so she has achieved a kind of celebrity that is unique for a woman on Wall Street. She was profiled on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* as a public-

relations power broker who enjoys the special privilege of being married to one of the country's most influential men, American Express chairman James D. Robinson III. Her secret machinations with leveraged-buyout king Henry Kravis during the \$25 billion takeover battle for RJR Nabisco, the tobacco-and-food conglomerate, provided some of the juiciest parts in the best-selling *Barbarians at the Gate*, a book that has been snapped up by Hollywood.

Her reputation blows in with her on this cold February evening, and she is instantly recognized by Harry Lavin, the "21" Club's sharp-eyed keeper of the gate. Harry escorts her over to my table. It is now past 7:30, a time when the Gordon Gekkos of the world have let down their slicked-back hair, but Linda Robinson charges across the crowded lounge with her strawberry-blond head bent forward, pumped up, on permanent overdrive.

Linda Robinson is thirty-seven and

has been in business for herself for less than five years, but she already ranks right up there in influence with Wall Street's small band of P.R. *mergermeisters*, men like Gershon Kekst of Kekst and Company and Dick Cheney of Hill and Knowlton. Over the past decade, public-relations consultants have joined in the ferocious hand-to-hand combat waged by lawyers, bankers, and C.E.O.'s for control of America's corporate assets, and if white knights have thundered across the pages of the financial press, they were put there by these behind-the-scenes imag makers. They are the tumblers of the new Gilded Age, hired to create a public commotion in order to frighten off opponents and promote the reputations of their clients. "This city is a city of victors," says a major Wall Street investor, "and to the victors go the spoils. The amplification of that victory is what P.R. is all about."

Linda Robinson is the only woman in

Illustration by RISK0



the middle of the fray. "I've met a lot of smart and capable women," says Nancy Reynolds, a prominent Washington lobbyist who has known Linda since she was a young woman in California, "but I've never met a woman in corporate public relations quite like her. Linda's in a class by herself."

Critics and competitors view her differently. "She seems to be a split personality of a dimension rarely seen," says someone who has had extensive dealings with her. "When you meet her, she's all charm and West Coast loveliness. But behind your back she'll do the most incredible things."

She greets me with a firm mistress-of-the-universe handshake. Large glasses are slipping off the narrow bridge of her nose. Her hair is piled into a retro Rita Hayworth pompadour that adds considerable height to her five-foot-eight-inch, 132-pound frame, making her appear almost willowy. Her plaid skirt stops a few inches north of her knees, exposing more leg than is ordinarily flashed in the sober precincts of corporate governance.

She is lugging an oversize light-brown leather briefcase that looks heavy enough to dislocate a shoulder under her padded jacket. She can give me just forty-five minutes; then she must rush back to the office to clean up some work and go off with her husband to a private dinner at the home of Bill Cosby.

I mention her famous father, Freeman Gosden, who played Amos and a host of other black-dialect characters on the *Amos 'n' Andy* comedy show, which was wildly popular with radio audiences in the thirties and forties. Her father was an intimate of California tycoons and Republican presidents, and until his death in 1982 he was the central figure in a roster of male mentors in his daughter's professional rise.

I've been forewarned that Linda Gosden Robinson won't make it easy, and sure enough, I'm immediately given to understand that *she* has been scrutinizing *my* past. There is a demand that I protect the delicacy of her client relationships by writing that she was reluctant to cooperate with this piece. She believes that people in public relations shouldn't be giving interviews about themselves to the press, but spending their time on their clients. She seems to see levels of betrayal lurking in every journalistic encounter.

This is a puzzling attitude for someone who has been building images for years, ever since she came out of California to work in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign. It's even stranger behavior for a woman who has courted the press—sometimes employing two car phones at once—in her effort to sugarcoat such clients as Michael Milken, of junk-bond fame, and Ross Johnson, the former C.E.O. of RJR Nabisco, whose name in some quarters is synonymous with greed.

But it's not the uninvited publicity that really bothers her; after all, she has posed in the past for a magazine, hoisted in the arms of her husband. He remains her most important client—as she says, "I do a lot of work for American Express too, but it's all for free"—and she doesn't want anything more in print about her husband's embarrassment over the costly dirty-tricks campaign waged by American Express to smear international banker Edmond Safra; his resounding defeat in the RJR Nabisco fracas in 1988; the forced resignation of Peter Cohen, who negotiated that deal for Shearson Lehman Hutton, a majority of which was owned by American Express; or the public humiliation Robinson suffered this year when he was forced to shell out more than a billion dollars to keep Shearson from going under like Drexel Burnham.

"The core of the issue about Linda is her relationship with her husband," says an investment banker at Shearson, "and anything that puts Jim under pressure puts Linda under pressure."

"She and her husband must be very worried about this new phrase, about Jim being called the Teflon executive," adds a financial reporter who speaks to her frequently. "They're worried *chez* Robinson that the Teflon might be wearing thin."

After some more wrangling, she finally settles down and begins to talk about her father. He was twenty-four years older than her mother—he was forty-three and her mother was nineteen when they got married. "When I was growing up," she says, "my father was full of wisdom. He believed a lot in character and ethics. My brother and I got lectures in the library about life." Her father used to say, "Always make sure you have the right kinds of friends, because when you lay down with dogs, you wake up with fleas." In school, a

couple of children thought, because of the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, that Linda's father was black, and some of their parents wouldn't let their kids play with her. People always asked her, "How can you look the way you do when your father is Amos?"

Because of his success, her father was always surrounded by business people who wanted to be around entertainment people. C.E.O.'s came to their home, and her father wished he were a businessman instead of in the entertainment industry. He used to say, "If you go into the entertainment business, I'll break your leg." He treated Linda and her older brother alike. He thought life was tough and a woman had to work hard. He wasn't one who believed that girls should get married and have children and boys should be the breadwinners.

"I was a tomboy who loved to play sports—tennis, volleyball, basketball, horseback riding. When I was little, my father would take me out to the backyard and give me pitching lessons. He made me throw the ball until I pitched like a guy."

She's been playing with the guys ever since, but on Wall Street the game can get pretty rough. Many people in this brutally competitive arena operate on the assumption that their phones are tapped and that hidden tape recorders are whirring quietly beneath the table. Talk of private detectives doesn't shock them. Blood feuds are common. Along with others, Linda Robinson is a Niagara of leaks to journalists in the financial press.

The frenzied two-month battle in 1988 for control of RJR Nabisco brought together a stellar cast of Wall Street characters. Jim Robinson and Peter Cohen marshaled the forces of Shearson—America's second-largest securities firm—plus an army of lawyers and advisers, and pitted them against the legions of takeover king Henry Kravis. Jim Robinson himself acted as the chief financial consultant to his friend Ross Johnson, RJR's C.E.O., in his failed leveraged-buyout bid, and Linda was Johnson's P.R. counsel. *Barbarians at the Gate* provided a fascinating glimpse into this no-holds-barred struggle when it revealed that Linda Robinson ventured far beyond the cus-

The Robinsons resemble a nation-state; they don't have friends so much as permanent interests.



Georgette Mosbacher greets Linda, center, with Jim at Saul Steinberg's fiftieth-birthday party, 1989.

tomary role of a P.R. counsel and was operating a back channel to Henry Kravis without the knowledge of his adversary, Shearson's Peter Cohen, who was working for her husband.

"I was asked by my client, Ross Johnson, to see if I could set up a meeting between him and Henry Kravis," she explains. "The reason I did not tell anybody is because I was asked by my client not to tell anybody, not a single soul, including my husband. It was Ross Johnson who chose to tell Jim."

In response to the charge that she was partly responsible for Peter Cohen's downfall this past January, she says spiritedly, "The story that I wanted Peter Cohen to take the fall—that theory is pathetic and implausible. My husband was defending Peter Cohen. I only rooted for Peter Cohen to succeed, for his failure would only have hurt Jim."

Others—investment bankers, former senior executives at Shearson, journalists, corporate C.E.O.'s, private investigators—tell a different tale. "Peter worked for Jim Robinson, and Linda was doing a razzmatazz behind Peter's back," says an executive who worked with Cohen at the time. "Peter didn't find out about it until a year later, when he read the *Barbarians* excerpt in *The Wall Street Journal*. Peter went bat shit. At that point, it completely, finally sunk in that his tenure at Shearson was over."

"What really rankled Peter," says a reporter who tracked the story closely, "is that Jim wouldn't tell him. It was a

de facto vote of no confidence." Cohen is a Cagney-esque figure on Wall Street, famous for his short fuse, but his friends say that he was paralyzed by shock and couldn't fully comprehend what was happening to him.

Just before the book appeared, *Fortune* ran a flattering cover story on American Express that extolled Jim Robinson as a model chief executive and suggested that Peter Cohen was to blame for the series of financial disasters, including the \$1 billion purchase of E. F. Hutton and a portfolio of shaky loans, that were bleeding Shearson of its capital. To Cohen, *Barbarians*—in which Jim Robinson was portrayed as above the fray while Peter Cohen came across as a thuggish dummy—seemed like a replay of the *Fortune* story, and Cohen thought he detected Linda Robinson's fingerprints on the article.

"Linda and Peter's wife, Karen, didn't get along," says someone who watched the relationship between the two women deteriorate. "Peter got more and more paranoid that Linda was trying to get him. He told me, 'I suspect that Jim and Linda are setting me up.' He really thought that his problem was Linda—that she was causing problems with Jim. It got unfriendly between Karen and Linda."

A distraught Karen Cohen went to Gershon Kekst, the man who practically invented corporate P.R., and asked him for advice on how to handle the problem. She also phoned Hope Lampert, a

business journalist, and asked her out to lunch. "Karen wanted to get to the bottom of this—why reporters didn't like her husband," says Lampert. "The lunch was ultimately canceled, and I have the distinct impression that Peter Cohen told his wife not to go."

Cohen himself reportedly confronted Jim Robinson. "He broached the possibility with Jim that Linda was involved," says a man who was told about the meeting. "He had no hard evidence. Robinson denied it up and down. He made comments of support to Peter."

What complicated the whole matter was Cohen's close relationship with one of Amex's sworn enemies, Edmond Safra. From 1986 to 1989, this portly billionaire banker was the target of a worldwide smear campaign in the press, secretly waged by American Express, that made unfounded allegations linking him to illegal practices after he resigned from Amex and laid the groundwork for a rival business.

"In the summer of 1989," says a highly informed source, "I told Peter that there was a backfire campaign on the part of Safra, and that he was gathering sufficient evidence that senior American Express officials were behind the media campaign against him. I told Peter, 'You've got a situation here where these people are going to bring this to the prosecutors. You should go and tell Jim that he's got a problem.' Of course, Peter was suspect, because he had a longtime relationship with Edmond."

"When this thing came out about Safra," says a prominent investment banker who is not particularly friendly with either Peter Cohen or Jim Robinson, "American Express was totally destabilized. There was chaos. The place was out of control."

Among the people Robinson consulted was his wife. He often invites her to participate in strategy sessions, both outside the office and even on occasion in his fifty-first-floor suite in the American Express Tower. Linda suggested that Jim hire P.R. consultant John Scanlon to help manage the mounting Safra crisis. Ultimately, Jim Robinson issued an extraordinary "Dear Edmond" apology to Safra and donated \$8 million to charities of his choice, and Harry Freeman, one of Robinson's closest friends and the head of Amex's corporate communications, retired.

"Mistakes were made on my watch," said Freeman as he took the fall.

I interviewed Freeman about the Safra matter and what role, if any, he thought Linda Robinson played in it. "I was not aware of any defamation against Safra," he said. "To the extent that Linda Robinson knows, she may know more than me. But I don't know what she knows."

"For somebody like Harry Freeman to be running around putting out these horrible stories about Safra without checking with his C.E.O. doesn't pass the smell test," says a highly regarded investment banker. In fact, the "retired" Freeman never entirely left the bosom of American Express; he still receives a consulting fee from his old company, and has been working for it on special events and trade-related matters.

But the fact remains that for all this talk no one ever produced any evidence directly linking Jim Robinson to the campaign against Safra. The same can be said regarding Linda Robinson. Someone who is familiar with the memos assembled by Safra's team of private detectives says, "Her name did not surface in any evidentiary sense." Linda Robinson says, "I never spent one millisecond in any effort to disparage Mr. Safra. If anyone makes these accusations, ask them for specifics. They can't come up with anything. They're making up stories."

Shortly after the Safra affair was settled, according to several people close to Peter Cohen, Cohen ran into Linda Robinson at Saul Steinberg's lavish fiftieth-birthday party on Long Island last summer. One of these sources, reconstructing the conversation, says, "Linda said to Peter, 'You know, we still have plenty on Edmond.' And Peter said to Linda, 'Have you lost your mind? Don't you think the company has suffered enough?' As soon as he said that, he thought he had made a big mistake and that he was finished with Linda. From that point forward, Peter believed that Linda assumed he would side with Edmond, and that she wouldn't have anything to do with him."

Regarding this alleged conversation, Linda Robinson says, "That's an absolute fabrication, told by someone with a vested interest in peddling that story."

Two weeks later, as Shearson continued to fall deeper and deeper into trouble, the Robinsons flew off to Tangier with Revlon's chairman, Ronald Perelman, and his wife, Claudia Cohen, to attend Malcolm Forbes's (*Continued on page 182*)

Linda Robinson

(Continued from page 124) seventieth-birthday extravaganza. Linda Robinson sits on Revlon's board of directors, and although she is reluctant to talk about her clients, she receives a retainer as a P.R. consultant to Perelman. When the Robinsons returned, according to a former Shearson executive, "Jim went to Peter and said, 'My friend Ron Perelman wants to invest in your company.'" He also told a number of other people that the idea of bringing in Perelman as Shearson's savior was "my wife's idea."

Perelman was prepared to put up \$250 million to bail out Shearson, and there are those who claim that Linda actually stood to make at least \$2.5 million as the broker of the deal—a charge she adamantly denies. Linda Robinson thinks that is another preposterous accusation that doesn't even pass a plausibility test.

Cohen killed the deal. "Peter was scared to death about Perelman," says a prominent Wall Street lawyer. "American Express wanted to reduce its equity position in Shearson, and Peter might have ended up working for Perelman. His decision must have pissed off Linda. When you're getting the kind of retainer Linda's getting from Revlon, you've got to deliver."

A desperate Cohen tried to sell an offering of new shares in Shearson, but the plan fizzled because potential investors didn't want any part of the troubled securities firm. "By the time of Perelman," says someone who talked frequently with Peter Cohen during his final days, "the game was virtually over. If Cohen had gone along with the Perelman deal, maybe he'd have bought himself six months. But once he stood up to that, he was dead."

"There is a little of the tomboy about Linda," says Oscar de la Renta, who owns a weekend home near the Robinsons in the rolling hills of western Connecticut. "Linda's a very bright girl. When a woman has a powerful husband, people say she's successful because of her husband. Linda could have done as well without Jim."

"I've seen Linda and Jim sitting together in their Connecticut estate on a Sunday morning, reading their own work material, chatting, having a wonderful time," says another friend who weekends in Litchfield County. "They are a very sharing couple, both on a private and on a professional level. It's a real marriage, a partnership; it doesn't break down the way it does in some of those other power marriages."

Their country house was once featured in an eight-page spread in *Architectural Digest*. Linda was unhappy with the writer, Michael Thomas, because he described the thirty-six-acre farm, with its green pastures and spectacular view of Lake Waramaug, as the perfect place for a two-briefcase couple to recharge their batteries. The house, she pointed out, was not for relaxing.

The house has five separate phone lines, at least two of which seem to be blinking at all times. The fifty-four-year-old chairman of American Express (annual revenues: \$25 billion) gets up at 5:40, knocks off nine hundred sit-ups, or works out with an aerobics instructor or alone with the exercise video *Buns of Steel*, or lifts weights in his "muscle room," located in a separate structure about fifty yards from the main house. His wife, the president and C.E.O. of Robinson, Lake, Lerer & Montgomery (estimated annual revenues: \$19 million), raises and trains championship show horses.

She has been known to invite a reporter to feel Jim's bulging biceps, and he has accompanied her to a Halloween party in the country dressed in a Superman costume. After her husband, her pride and joy are her five horses, two of which she owns in partnership with Henry Kravis.

This has given rise to the story, retailed by Linda, that the Robinsons and Kravises are still the best of friends, despite the fact that Henry trounced Jim and Linda in the biggest takeover battle in history, for control of RJR Nabisco. "I enjoy Linda and we'll have dinner at their home," hedges Kravis's fashion-designer wife, Carolyn Roehm, "but we're not terribly close."

Mica Ertegun, the socialite interior designer, recalls a cruise the Robinsons took about five years ago, along with their mothers and Ross and Laurie Johnson, to the Ertegun's home in Bodrum, Turkey. "Linda, who is very precise, wanted everything written—what day we meet, where we go—so I gave her an itinerary," says Mrs. Ertegun. "We spent a couple of days in Bodrum, swimming off their boat, having dinner. She's a good swimmer. We're all very square, meaning there weren't many bikinis. Jim is incredibly athletic. He has muscles that I've never seen on a man. They couldn't have been nicer guests. Easygoing, very enthusiastic about everything. They're too intelligent to be spoiled. They had a lot before; they're not like people who just made money."

They both came from wealthy families. Her father had a house next to Dwight Eisenhower's at the El Dorado

Linda Robinson

Country Club in Indian Wells, California. Jim's father, and his father before him, was chairman of First National Bank of Atlanta.

But it's their temperaments that make them ideally suited for each other. "Linda's a fireball," says an acquaintance, "full of energy and intelligence, relentlessly energetic. And so is Jim. When she met Jim Robinson, she cocked her hat for him. The second she shook his hand, she understood she wanted him."

"I first started hearing about Linda during the heyday of Françoise de la Renta," says a woman who travels in the same New York social circles. "You know, before she died, Françoise was the air controller—she knew who was going to make it. Linda and Jim were accepted in Françoise's salon. Françoise liked her because she was bright and young and going with someone important."

This was back in 1983, when Jim was just coming out of a failed marriage that had produced two children. His first wife, Bettye, had suffered a serious stroke in 1981 and was in a coma for five months before she began to recover. "The stroke had a lot to do with our divorce," says the first Mrs. Robinson, who now lives in Sun Valley. "It brought everything to a head."

"When Jim met Linda," says someone who worked very closely with Robinson at the time, "he really fell hard in love, precisely because Linda wasn't a glamour puss. I knew something of Jim's private life during the period preceding this, and there was a big contrast. He had been publicly dating people like Morgan Fairchild. Linda was certainly a different category of woman. Jim was clearly mesmerized. He was so thrilled because she was smart, and my feeling was that she was smarter than he. He was genuinely admiring of her. He couldn't keep his hands off her. They'd wander in the halls of American Express holding hands."

Exactly when they started dating—before or after Linda went to work for Warner Amex, a cable company that was half owned by American Express—is still a matter of some controversy. Some say she began dating Jim in the late summer or early fall of 1983—four or five months after she took the job as Warner Amex's chief of P.R. When the company was sold, Linda walked away with a compensation package of over \$1 million. In a proxy statement, American Express stockholders were informed: "Mr. Rob-

inson had no participation in her employment, the terms of her employment or in the establishment of her compensation arrangements."

They were married in July 1984, and the trajectory of their marriage coincided with the greed-and-glory days of Wall Street. By some standards, the Robinsons are not fabulously wealthy. His Amex salary and bonus amount to about \$4 million a year, and his personal net worth, according to some on Wall Street, is in the range of \$30 million—about one-fiftieth of that of his close friend Revlon's Ronald Perelman. As for Linda, knowledgeable people in the P.R. industry speculate that she works off a base salary of half a million dollars a year and gets a hefty bonus for being her company's rainmaker.

They are perhaps second in influence only to the man-and-wife team in the White House.

But as befits people of their station, the Robinsons live like royalty. They make the society pages and keep an apartment in the exclusive Museum Tower in Manhattan. There is a third residence in the Palm Beach Polo and Country Club in Wellington, Florida, where she rides competitively. They vacation in Roaring Gap, the super-Wasp summer enclave in North Carolina where Jim's mother, one of the grande dames of the Deep South, presides. They ski at Shearson's \$25 million lodge in Beaver Creek, Colorado. They attend the Annenbergs' New Year's Eve bash with the Reagans, and are close to Frank Sinatra, Barbara Walters, Tom Brokaw, Henry Kissinger, and *Wall Street Journal* managing editor Norman Pearlstine.

When Robinson speaks about his wife, he can sound like a newly smitten swain. "I was interviewing him," recalls a reporter, "and he was positively teary-eyed about her. He told me, 'I wouldn't be anything without the support of my wife. I love her

so much, I just don't want to share her with a child.'"

In some ways, the Robinsons resemble a nation-state; they really don't have friends so much as they have permanent interests. Their "country" is American Express, the charge-card, travel, and financial-services giant. It is one of the largest advertisers in America—it spends up to \$250 million a year—and some cynics believe that this accounts for the favorable treatment Jim has generally been accorded by the press during his thirteen years as chairman.

His reach and influence are further extended by American Express's legendary public-relations machine, which churns out speeches and congressional statements that have made Jim Robinson a kind of secretary of state of Corporate America, as he was characterized by the authors of *Barbarians at the Gate*. Two years ago, he succeeded David Rockefeller as chairman of the prestigious New York City Partnership, an organization of corporations dedicated to economic development, low-income housing, and education in New York City.

In addition to its 100,000-plus employees, Amex also finds use for legions of high-priced lawyers, investment bankers, and outside P.R. consultants. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that at times it seems everyone on Wall Street is working for American Express. With these lucrative fees being thrown around, not many on Wall Street are eager to criticize the Robinsons.

Linda spins her own large and impressive web. Thanks to the Robinsons' business and social agenda, her access is unsurpassed, and she has the skill to broker people with names like Kissinger and Reagan. A couple of years ago, Ron Perelman put her on the Revlon board of directors. Henry Kissinger, who is on the Amex board, joined the Revlon board shortly thereafter. "I was approached directly by Ron Perelman to go on his board," Kissinger told me. "Linda, who is an old friend, told me later in a social conversation that she thought it was a good idea."

For a while, Henry Kravis seriously considered dropping his longtime P.R. man, Gershon Kekst, and hiring Linda Robinson, a move he ultimately did not make out of loyalty to Kekst. "Henry has a young fashion-designer wife who is interested in building her business by being very social," says a person who is knowledgeable about Kravis's thinking. "He lives and plays in a world of people like Linda Robinson, and when the press takes potshots at him, it kills him. In his mind's eye, Mrs. Robinson represents access into

Linda Robinson

the social, respectable world, and there is this feeling in the back of Henry Kravis's mind that if he works with Linda she'll keep those people around him, and it will protect him, and he won't get bad press."

This his-and-hers strength makes the Robinsons the most powerful business couple in America—perhaps second in influence only to the man-and-wife team in the White House. "Your story," one C.E.O. tells me, "is about the American Express Family Robinson."

Jim Robinson has nurtured the image of the courtly southern gentleman. Where Jim is deft, Linda can hit you like a water cannon, and people are sometimes left with the impression that they play the roles of good cop, bad cop, like Ronald and Nancy Reagan.

For instance, when I began reporting this story, Linda was reluctant to give an interview. However, I went to a black-tie dinner given by the New York City Police Foundation, at which Jim Robinson was to be honored, and after the Emerald Society Pipes and Drums had finished skirling "Danny Boy" I approached the Robinsons' table. Linda gave me a withering look and barely acknowledged my presence, but Jim immediately jumped up and shook my hand.

"I'm doing a story on your wife," I said.

"I know, I know," he replied, smiling and shaking his head. "I'm trying to convince her to go along, but... She's the most persistent person I know."

Some consider Jim Robinson's image to be just that—a public persona. "Jim is a driven, tough man," says an executive who worked with him for years. "Beneath that southern drawl, there are stones inside him. My perception is that Robinson and Linda are really partners, and one isn't senior or junior. They're convinced their job in life is to protect each other. Jim wakes up every morning and worries, How is the world going to perceive me? and he thinks Linda is good at that stuff. She certainly tries to protect him."

People began to take notice of Linda Robinson's P.R. talent when she arrived in Washington at the age of twenty-six, an intense, ambitious deputy to James Lake, the press secretary in Ronald Reagan's 1980 bid for the presidency.

Back in California at that time, Linda's parents were members of Ron and Nancy Reagan's conservative Orange County crowd, and Linda had been a debutante

who grew up with Patti Reagan and Ron junior, as well as with kids who had famous West Coast names like Jorgensen, Wick, and Dart.

For a while, she didn't know quite what she wanted to do with her life. She dropped out of U.C.L.A. to marry Stephen Dart, the handsome, fun-loving son of industrialist Justin Dart, but that marriage lasted only a couple of years. Linda worked for a time at an acupuncture clinic in U.C.L.A.'s Pain Management Center before returning to school at the University of Southern California. *Who's Who* says she graduated summa cum laude; U.S.C.'s records list her a couple of notches down, as a still-impressive cum laude, but she maintains the records are incorrect.

In any case, there was no doubt about her powerful connections in the Reagan inner circle; her mentors were Jim Lake, Reagan campaign manager John Sears, and political director Charles Black. But during Reagan's bleakest period, on the day of the New Hampshire primary, he fired the trio from the campaign, and Linda was summoned to Nancy Reagan's hotel suite in Manchester to hear the bad news.

"She had a blowup with Nancy Reagan in the suite," says someone who worked for Nancy Reagan at the time and is still close to the former First Lady. "My understanding is that Linda used every four-letter word in the book to prevent Sears from being dismissed. It was almost an act of desperation, because she was seeing her future going out the window with these guys. [Michael] Deaver and [Edwin] Meese, who were replacing her colleagues, didn't much care for Linda, and she sensed her days would be numbered."

Linda denies that there was a fight with Nancy. She remembers that Mrs. Reagan told her about the firing of the three people, and told her that, if she stayed, the Reagan camp would like her to be press secretary. Linda thought she would not be an effective member of the incoming team because that new team had wanted to get rid of the old campaign structure. And therefore she resigned.

Though Linda and Nancy eventually buried the hatchet, at the time Linda was left in the wilderness of the Republican National Committee, where she performed very well. "She's the best P.R. person I've ever encountered," says Morton Kondracke, a senior editor of *The New Republic*. "It's almost a personal relationship she gets the writer involved in, and inevitably you got yourself in the position of valuing this friendship and not wanting to destroy it. And so you were careful and

you would check things with her and go along with whatever the terms were she would impose, because, one, you liked her a lot, and, two, you wanted to keep access with her."

She also impressed Drew Lewis, a highly regarded businessman who was the deputy chairman of the Republican National Committee. When Reagan won the election and Lewis was appointed secretary of transportation, Linda moved over with him as his press secretary. "Drew was a really smart operator," says veteran Washington journalist Lou Cannon. "He knew that she was popular with reporters."

Former members of the Reagan administration give her high marks for the way she handled the air-traffic controllers' strike, the gas-tax increase, and other sensitive issues at Transportation.

"I introduced her to Jim Robinson," Drew Lewis recalls. "I was dealing with David Rockefeller and Jim on the development of the West Side Highway in New York. Jim asked me to be chairman of Warner Amex, and as I was getting ready to leave Transportation, I had a dinner at Christmastime in Washington and invited Jim and Steve Ross. I put Linda and Jim together for no particular reason, and when the party broke up everyone went his own way, and a group went out with Jim and Linda dancing. From then on they were dancing partners."

Two years after her marriage to Jim Robinson, Linda established her own P.R. firm with Jim Lake and Kenneth Lerer, the campaign director in Bess Myerson's 1980 Senate race. Lawyer Joseph Flom, whose firm does a great deal of legal work for American Express and Shearson, tried to arrange a business match between Linda and Gershon Kekst, but neither of them was interested. Instead, her fledgling firm was acquired by Charles Peebler, the chief executive of Bozell, Jacobs, Kenyon & Eckhardt, the large advertising agency.

"Chuck Peebler is a good friend of the Robinsons'," says an executive who was familiar with the terms of the agreement, "and he didn't put up a lot of money. He funded the growth of the firm and agreed to an incentive payout, based on performance, over a period of years."

The senior management of the firm—which an *Adweek* supplement recently ranked among the ten hottest P.R. agencies—is considered among the best in the industry. A little over two years ago, American Express's chief spokesman, Walter Montgomery, who had a P.R. background in mergers and acquisitions,

joined the firm as a fourth partner—a move that lent credence to the charge that Linda has carte blanche around her husband's company. "I'd be killed if my wife was in the P.R. business," says the C.E.O. of a Fortune 500 company. "You can't allow your wife to run through your organization. I don't understand why the American Express board stands for this."

Linda Robinson has pointed out to reporters that most of her one hundred or so clients have never even met her husband. Yet it is equally true that some of her current and former clients—Squibb, Revlon, Union Pacific, Time Warner, and the American Express Bank—have had a direct or indirect business relationship with Jim Robinson while paying fees of up to \$300 an hour to Robinson, Lake, Lerer & Montgomery. A number of people perceived a recent potential conflict of interest: Linda was on retainer to Primerica's Sanford Weill at the same time that Weill was trying to negotiate a merger between Shearson and his brokerage unit, Smith Barney, Harris Upham & Company.

Linda Robinson's competitors envy her for her client list, which also includes IBM and Texaco. She gets many of these clients through referrals from investment bankers and lawyers, who sing her praises. "I've worked with Linda on three matters," says lawyer Arthur Liman, "the representations of Michael Milken, Time Warner in its dispute with Sony, and the Dorrance family in connection with Campbell Soup. She is an absolutely first-rate professional. Look, it would probably be an exaggeration to say her husband is a drawback, but I don't think her husband brings her business at all."

"You can get a door open on occasion because of a relationship," says mergers lawyer Joe Flom, "but it doesn't stay open very long. My partners are calling me up to say they want to use her, not because of any relationship they have with her husband, but because their ass is on the line in the job they're doing and they want to get the best help they can."

"I've never done any business with her husband or seen him socially," says Eric Gleacher, the mergers-and-acquisitions expert, "but when I decided to leave Morgan Stanley and go out on my own, I hired her because I thought she was the best. She wrote up a release, so it was ready when I went in to resign, and the release went out under the Morgan Stanley letterhead."

Many chief executives enjoy working with her. "She is so self-assured and she makes them feel self-assured," says one

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of her competitors. "She works very hard and has lots of energy. And that's a major thing today with corporate types."

Others argue that she has a mixed track record. She was roundly criticized during the RJR Nabisco battle when she allowed her loose-cannon client, Ross Johnson, to cooperate with a cover story in *Time* magazine that turned out to portray him as the epitome of greed. Her office phoned journalists all over the country in a heavy-handed effort to discredit a book on Michael Milken, *The Predators' Ball*, by Connie Bruck—a tactic that backfired badly and helped make the book a best-seller.

"Her plodding work for Mike Milken is like King Kong," says someone in the corporate-strategy business. "It's like 'Look, Mike gives parties for crippled children, he funds minority enterprises, see? Mike's a nice guy and he couldn't possibly be guilty of the crimes he's accused of.' That's like the Al Capone defense: Let's hand out candy to children and nobody will dislike us. My observation is, her work has the political bent of a lobbyist—she puts out a story and expects the press will believe it."

There is a feeling among some journalists that she talks too much. She's on the line to financial reporters at all hours of

the day, from home, office, and car. "You pick up the phone and she says, 'Hi,'" one reporter tells me. "She doesn't identify herself. You just know. She often will take a very personal interest in your career. It's very flattering. She's Mrs. Jim Robinson. She knows everyone."

She also encourages reporters to call her, and everyone has her phone numbers. "The reason she gets gently treated by the press," says another journalist, "is not because she has friends in high places, like the *Journal's* Norman Pearlstine, but because she knows what's going on. She has an incredibly big mouth, like investment bankers. She's in the know, and she lets things slip that are beneficial to her side."

As a result, even when her assignments turn out to be less than brilliantly executed, she seems to satisfy two important sides—the people who hire her and the press. "If you want ink, she'll get you ink," says a corporate public-relations specialist who has worked with her in the heat of crisis. "She's more of a press agent. I never thought much of her sage comments. As far as strategy is concerned, that's where she falls down. On a scale of one to ten in business know-

Linda Robinson

how, I would place her at a two or a three.”

For all of Linda Robinson's P.R. skill, her husband has been taking a beating in the press. “I'm sorry he has to go through this,” she says, “but he's got a lot of strength and determination, and I think he and his team will fix the

Shearson problem. I don't think one should ever underestimate Jim's strength. He works harder than anyone I've ever known, and he'll solve this problem.”

Over the years, Jim Robinson has managed to survive one setback after another, including the abrupt departures from American Express of some of the most respected names in the financial industry—Sandy Weill, Edmond Safra, Louis

Gerstner (who was lured away by Henry Kravis), and Peter Cohen. If Jim Robinson is successful in his effort to rescue Shearson, a gamble on which he has staked his personal credibility, the Teflon is likely to remain intact. In public relations, there is a saying that you are only as good as your client. And this is especially true in the case of Linda Robinson, whose most important client is her husband. □