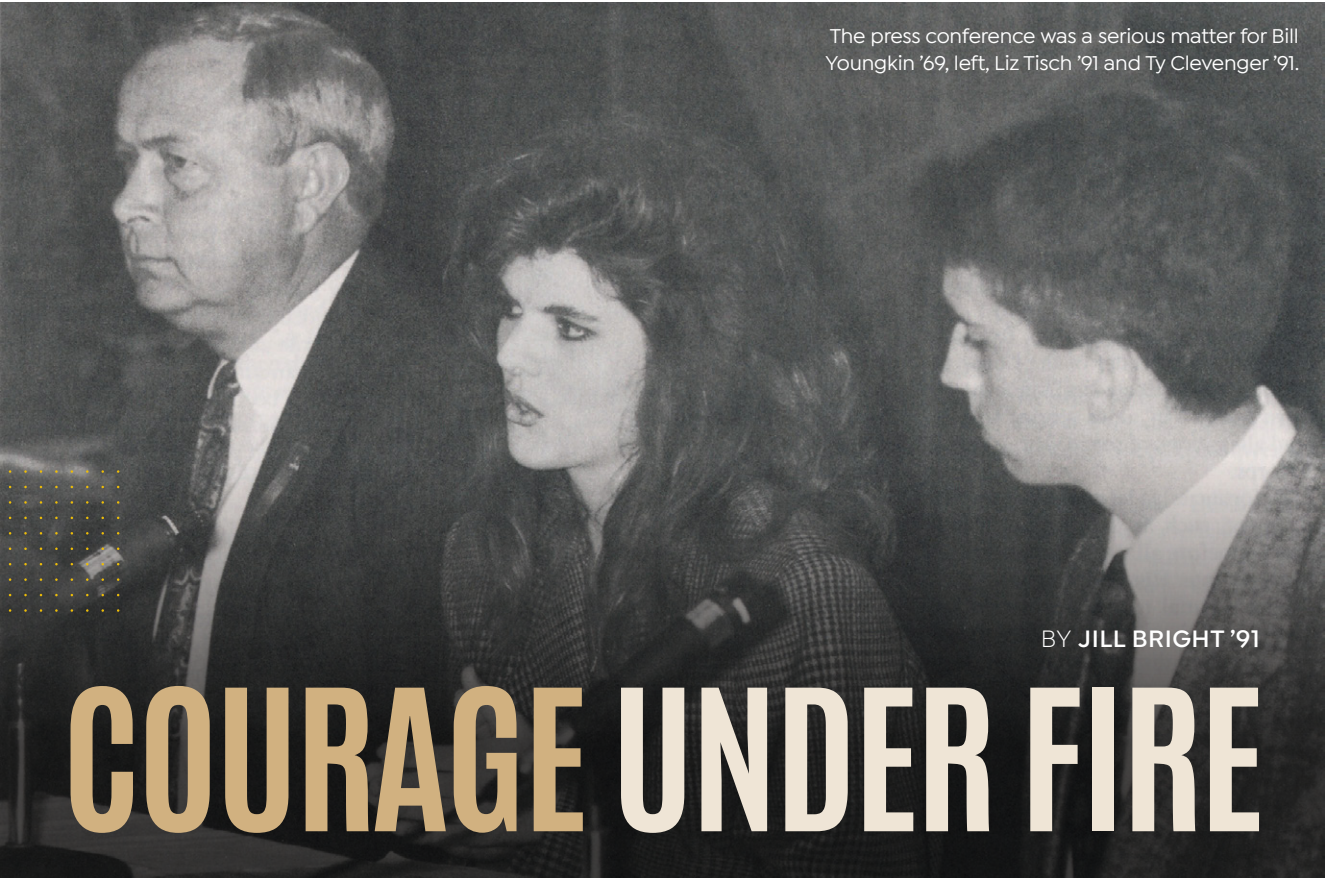




The press conference was a serious matter for Bill Youngkin '69, left, Liz Tisch '91 and Ty Clevenger '91.

BY JILL BRIGHT '91

COURAGE UNDER FIRE

The editor of *The Guidon*, Laura Siegel, and staff writer, Jill Bright, sat down with Bill Youngkin '69 to get his perspective on “How a Corps Commander & The Battalion Reporter Saved the Corps.” Youngkin’s interview focuses on courage, integrity, and doing the right thing even when it is difficult.

As a first-generation college student who arrived in Aggieland from a small farm town, in the Corps Youngkin found a place where character mattered more than background.

“I found out I was going to be judged on two things,” he says. “My ability and the content of my character.” That belief guided him during the crisis of the early 1990s at his beloved Texas A&M University and Corps of Cadets.

Youngkin set the stage by saying the ‘90s were of the Clinton era, when “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was implemented in the United States Armed Services, a time of unrest in the nation. Because of this, many turned their frustrations onto the military; at A&M, the Corps of Cadets was the next best thing.

It all began at A&M when a young woman in Parsons Mounted Cavalry

claimed she was physically assaulted by another cadet in the unit. The word quickly spread through the media, and people started to scrutinize the Corps. Rumors compounded and parents began calling cadets asking why they would stay in an organization receiving such negative publicity. The constant criticism took a toll.

Most alarming of all, discussions had begun among some cadets about resigning from the Corps in mass.

“It was a remarkable time,” recalls Youngkin, who was serving as president of the Association of Former Students when the controversy erupted. According to Youngkin, the negative publicity created a sense of uncertainty unlike any he had seen.

Randy Matson ’67, the Executive Director of the Association, received

a call from John Sherman ’92, then Corps Commander, requesting a meeting with Matson and Youngkin.

Sherman, Deputy Corps Commander Kurt Sauer ’92, Matson, and Youngkin met at the Association headquarters to discuss the future of the Corps.

The meeting was eye opening, Youngkin explains. “When they said cadets were thinking about resigning en masse, they got my attention really quick,” he says. “That would have been the death penalty. It would have never come back.”

WHAT HAPPENED IN DUNCAN

At the completion of the meeting Sherman asked Matson and Youngkin if they would come and address the Corps of Cadets. They agreed and

decided to address the cadets the next morning in Duncan Dining Hall.

Neither man came with a prepared speech, but with a simple message: the Corps mattered, and they were not alone.

Corey Keniston ’92, then a senior in the Corps, remembers the speech well. “During that time, I remember feeling very threatened as an organization. We really didn’t know exactly what to do. After Matson and Youngkin came to talk to us, it was clear they had our backs.”

What happened next stuck with Youngkin for a lifetime. As the cadets were leaving Duncan, they just stopped and began singing the “Spirit of Aggieland” a cappella. “It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up,” Youngkin says. “It’s a moment I’ll never forget.”

The controversy continued, and the University was reluctant to act on the situation. During this time *The Battalion* reporter, Liz Tisch ’91, was investigating the controversy and reporting exactly what was going on. It turns out the alleged sexual harassment did not happen, and the accuser had fabricated the story. The damage was already done. The media was not letting it go and the A&M Corps of Cadets was in the national headlines as a toxic environment where women were harassed.

Tisch and the student body president at the time, Ty Clevenger ’92, found themselves in possession of information that challenged the narrative. They shared this information with Sherman and all agreed something needed to be done to save the Corps and set the record straight. Sherman then shared this information with the Association’s Board.

A PLAN IS FORMED

After the Association’s Board met, they decided to call a press conference and allow the two students to tell the truth, if they were willing. They knew the implications of this type of



TY CLEVINGER '91



LIZ TISCH '91



BILL YOUNGKIN '69

press conference, that it could have huge backlash. Matson and Youngkin insisted they consult with their parents before agreeing to do it. “This is serious,” Youngkin remembers telling them. “The repercussions could be significant.” After speaking with their families, both students agreed.

Word of the coming press conference spread among the University officials and was not well received. Phone calls to the Association urged cancellation. University officials warned more problems would be created than it solved. Even members of the Board of Regents expressed concerns.

Youngkin recalls the Association Board was asked to meet with John Koldus, the Vice President of Student Affairs at the time with the whole Board in attendance. Koldus also expressed his concerns about the press conference. In that meeting, the Board expressed their dire concern that if the truth was not told, the Corps would no longer exist. Youngkin recalls, “The Board told Koldus how much they respected him and if he thought that it would do more harm than good, that they would cancel it. “He stood up from his chair, and said, “have a great press conference” and walked out the door,” says Youngkin. “To this day, that is why I love that man. He truly was courageous and had the best of the University’s students at heart.”

Game on! The next morning reporters from all over Texas packed the Association building. Television cameras lined the walls and the world

was listening. Youngkin opened the event and introduced the students.

For the next hour, Tisch and Clevenger answered questions from reporters, explaining what they had discovered and what they believed had happened behind the scenes.

“They were sharp, articulate, and composed,” Youngkin recalls. “They told the truth, and that very day the record was set straight and the negative press ended.” The results were almost immediate. “The truth has that ability,” Youngkin reflects. “When people recognize it to be the truth.” Looking back, Youngkin remains convinced their actions changed the course of Corps history.

Had the Board and these students remained silent, he believes the outcome could have been different. “The courage it required of them to stand before reporters, challenge the prevailing narrative, and accept personal consequences remains remarkable even today,” says Youngkin.

Over 30 years later Youngkin is still passionate about telling the story. “The story needs to be told,” he says. “It resonates, especially in today’s world. The same principles that the Corps of Cadets was founded on are what saved the Corps that day. It was about courage, character and integrity. In my opinion, those two students saved the Corps of Cadets. Period.”

A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO BILL YOUNGKIN '69 FOR SHARING HIS INSIGHT ON THIS STORY.