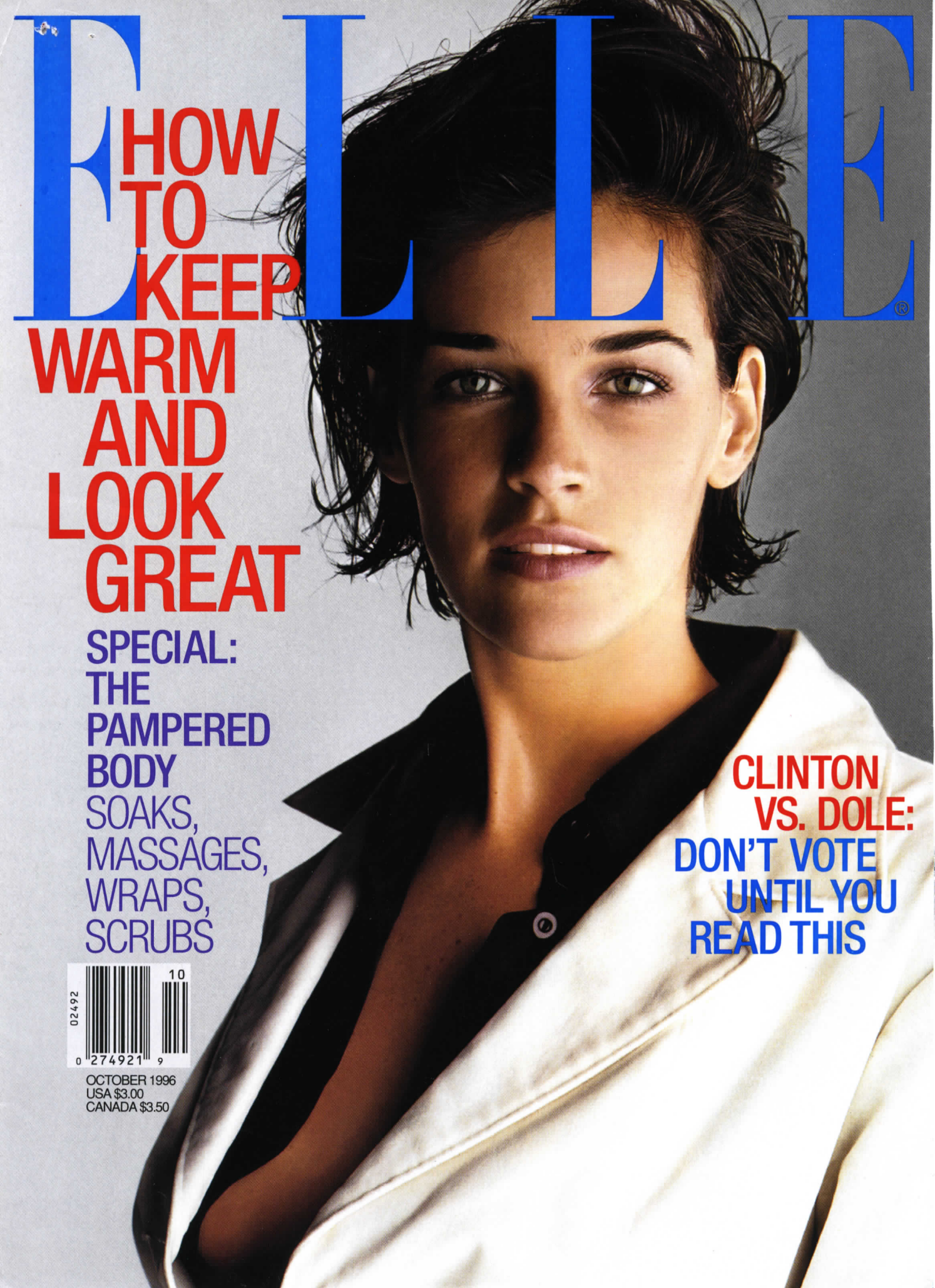
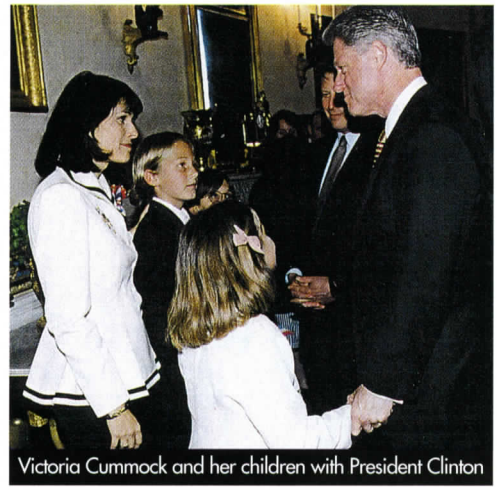

ELLE
HOW TO KEEP WARM AND LOOK GREAT
SPECIAL: THE PAMPERED BODY
SOAKS, MASSAGES, WRAPS, SCRUBS
CLINTON VS. DOLE: DON'T VOTE UNTIL YOU READ THIS
02492
10
0 274921 9
OCTOBER 1996
USA $3.00
CANADA $3.50

hell's angel

You'd think she'd never want to see the wreckage of a plane—or a hurricane, or a bombing—again. But Victoria Cummock has survived her own disaster by tending to everyone else's. By Kevin R. Richardson



Victoria Cummock and her children with President Clinton

When the families of those killed aboard TWA Flight 800 last July complained of insensitive treatment by investigators and the airline, it didn't surprise Victoria Cummock. Her husband died in an air crash seven and a half years earlier, a victim of Libyan terrorists who blew up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. For twenty hours after the crash, Pan Am officials refused to confirm that John Cummock was dead. Victoria, the mother of three young children, was told the airline was still checking on his status, and to call back the next day.

After the media reported that no passengers had survived, Cummock lost her temper with the Pan Am employee at the other end of the phone line. "How could you think of telling me to wait, to call back and hold out hope?" she said. It was not until she threatened to query the press that airline officials finally confirmed her husband's death. Cummock later told a House subcommittee that some Flight 103 victims' families weren't contacted for days; that one couple learned of their daughter's death via a message on their answering machine; that body parts were put in boxes and shipped home without special handling. Several families got the wrong bodies altogether.

Realizing her own experience wasn't a fluke, Cummock embarked on a crusade that has made her the most visible spokesperson for the relatives of disaster victims. By her own count, she has worked with families of victims from eighteen catastrophes, including the Oklahoma City bombing and the crashes of ValuJet Flight 592 and TWA Flight 800, often visiting the sites to help in the immediate aftermath of a disaster. She tells them that while their lives will never be the same, they need not be "a living victim of tragedy." She doesn't say that for months after her husband died, she lived in a kind of trance, eating and sleeping little, often forgetting whether it was night or day. "My heart is broken whenever there's another crash," she says. "I know how hard it is to pick up the pieces."

Cummock has also relentlessly pressed the FAA, Congress, and the White House for stricter security and anti-terrorism measures and for other protections for disaster victims' families. She lobbied successfully for passage of the 1990 Aviation Security Improvement Act and for the 1996 Anti-Terrorism Act, which allows Americans to sue foreign governments that sponsor terrorism, and limits convicted terrorists' rights to appeal. She has met repeatedly with President Clinton (as she did with President Bush) and has testified before Congress twenty times. Clinton singled her out in his eulogy for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing, repeating words she had asked him to say: "The anger you feel is valid, but you must not allow yourselves to be consumed by it. The hurt you feel must not be allowed to turn into hate, but instead into the search for justice."

Her opinions were not always so welcome. "People used to say, 'There goes that kooky Pan Am widow,' " she recalls. These days, she's seen as more akin to an avenging angel, especially by families she has worked with. "Victoria brings a heightened sense of humanity to a painful process," says Richard Kessler, whose wife, Kathleen, died in the ValuJet crash last May. Kessler says that Cummock's credibility stems from the fact that she doesn't benefit financially from her advocacy work. Cummock, forty-three, estimates she's spent $100,000 of her own money on her crusade.

"A zoo" is how Cummock describes the ballroom at the Ramada hotel near New York's John F. Kennedy Airport, where the families of TWA Flight 800's victims waited for any word on the investigation or recovery efforts, and where federal, state, and city agencies had set up operations. She says that officials milled about in booths as if attending a convention, while briefings were held whenever an investigator stepped up to the podium. On one occasion, a medical examiner discussed mutilated body parts as the families tried to eat dinner. At Cummock's recommendation, the agencies were moved out, and briefings were scheduled at regular intervals. She also bristled at the forms the Suffolk County Medical Examiner asked victims' relatives to fill out, which included a question (ostensibly to help in the identification of bodies) about whether the victim had been a smoker. "The airlines want to start putting a price on people's heads," she explains.

Although Cummock cries at every new disaster, she says tragedy can be empowering. When Hurricane Andrew damaged her Coral Gables, Florida, home in 1992, she and her children (Christopher, fourteen; Matthew, twelve; and Ashley, ten) took it in stride. "It's just stuff, we thought. We'll fix it." Still, not a day goes by when she doesn't think of her husband. No doubt he would approve of her work. "The two of us," Cummock says, "were always trying to fix stuff that bugged us." □

PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA CUMMOCK