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“don't quote me”

Fleet street

***A Herald* reporter's suspension illuminates a larger issue: the media's obligation to provide tough, ongoing coverage of a financial behemoth**

by Dan Kennedy

In the matter of Robin Washington versus the *Boston Herald*, the real issue isn't whether the reporter butted heads with his editors over his coverage of FleetBoston and was ultimately ordered to stop covering the bank. That much has already been established, though it's impossible to say for certain whether Washington was -- as he suspects -- a victim of pressure to make nice with a major advertiser.

Nor is the issue whether Washington was stripped of his consumer and transportation columns because of his Fleet coverage. Here, at least, the facts seem reasonably clear: he wasn't, at least not directly. Washington was busted down to general assignment shortly after editor Andy Costello and managing editor for news Andrew Gully received calls about Washington from a reporter for the trade magazine *Editor & Publisher*. Washington admitted to Costello and Gully that he had complained about his treatment to a friend at *E&P*, though he contends it hadn't occurred to him that his comments would spark a story.

The real issue is whether the media are willing to subject Fleet to the tough, continuing scrutiny that the country's eighth-largest bank (following its \$16 billion merger with BankBoston last year) deserves. The Washington affair, unfortunately, is just one of several troubling signs.

Consider that, just several weeks ago, the *Boston Globe* refused to run an ad from the nonprofit Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America titled "Fleet's Outrageous Fees," thus forgoing \$25,000 rather than risk offending Fleet. *Globe* spokesman Rick Gulla told the *Phoenix* that

Washington to serve two-week suspension, return to *Herald*

Updated May 5, 2000 5PM EST

The Robin Washington saga appears to be over. In statements released to the media late Friday afternoon, the *Boston Herald*, the Newspaper Guild, and Washington himself announced that his indefinite suspension has been reduced to a two-week suspension without pay. When he returns to work, on May 14, he will be restored to his position as the *Herald's* transportation and consumer columnist, according to the statements.

The *Herald*: "Robin Washington, who was suspended indefinitely April 30 for what *Boston Herald* management believes was a violation of the contract, will serve a two-week suspension without pay and return to work on May 14 as consumer and transportation columnist. *Herald* management considers this an internal disciplinary matter and will not comment further on it."

Washington: "The agreement today between the Newspaper Guild and the *Boston Herald* represents a spirit of cooperation and communication that is vital to assuring a strong workplace in a free and open press. I look forward to returning to my beat, on which I have been assured I will be able to report without limitation. I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to all who have given me so much of their compassion, dedication, and support during this trying time."

The Guild: "In a meeting today between the *Boston Herald* and the Newspaper Guild of Greater Boston, Local 31032, the Guild was informed that the indefinite suspension of Guild member and *Boston Herald* columnist Robin Washington has been converted to two weeks without pay. While the Guild is pleased that Mr. Washington will be restored to his columnist position, the Guild will proceed with litigation of the suspension." The Guild statement was signed by Tom Mashberg, *Boston Herald* editorial-unit chair; Lesley Phillips, local president; and Thomas Hiltz, local administrative officer.

