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Those checks didn't bounce

Michael Gilchrist's belief that House members "bounced dozens of checks" (Public Forum, Jan. 15) is the direct result of consistently shoddy journalism in reporting and editorializing on the so-called "House bank scandal," which hit the press big time last spring.

For those who have forgotten, the precise and only meaning of "bounced check" is that it was returned to the recipient by his or her bank for lack of funds in the check-writer's account. The person who received the check, presumably for value given, is thereby damaged, and often is unable to recoup the loss.

In fact, though, there is no evidence whatever that any of the checks involved in this "scandal" fall into this category. By common agreement of many years standing, the checks were made good from the pool of House members' salary deposits.

Nevertheless, by persistent use of the term "bounced checks," columnists, editors and reporters perpetuate the false image of House members rioting in ill-gotten gains while their victims go hungry. The real scandal here lies with the press for promoting hype instead of practicing responsible journalism.

It's time to drop this nonissue.

— **Bill Becker**
Woodland Hills

Here's the back story to the above letter.

Bob Burdick, Editor
Daily News
October 20, 1992

Dear Mr. Burdick,

I am writing with regard to (Sacramento correspondent) Sandy Harrison's October 19 report on the Boxer/Herschensohn campaign.

In the journalistic parlance that has become the standard during this campaign season, Harrison writes "... if the Herschensohn campaign has its way, no one will step into the voting booth without knowing about [Barbara] Boxer's 143 bounced checks at the House Bank." (LONG TERM, column 3, back page.)

As I, my friends, and the staffer with whom I spoke at Congressman Beilenson's office recollect (and we all follow the political scene pretty closely), there is no "House bank," nor did any of the checks to which Harrison refers "bounce."

As I'm sure you remember, the House payroll office either held overdrafts written by members until their paychecks were deposited, or simply covered overdrafts with funds that were in the pool (which consisted entirely of House members' own money).

Thus, as I and everyone I have spoken to about the issue recall, no one who received such an overdraft from a House member had it returned to them because of insufficient funds. Since this is the precise and only meaning of the term "bounced check," the current widespread use of the term by journalists is totally inappropriate, and raises a serious question about the overall integrity of the Fourth Estate.

In the present case, Harrison presents "bounced checks" three times, only one of which is journalistically correct--viz., the quote of Herschensohn: "How do you bounce that many checks .."

In the other two instances, Harrison uses the term, implying a complete and uncritical acceptance of Herschensohn's "spin" on the issue. Worse yet, Harrison says "Boxer calls her bounced checks an embarrassing mistake that she regrets, ..." Here, by using the term instead of actually quoting Boxer, Harrison implies that she effectively pleads guilty to "bouncing" checks.

In fact, we have no way of knowing from the article whether

¹ The Daily News is not alone here. I have written to the Christian Science Monitor's senior Washington correspondent Godfrey Sperling about his use of "check-bouncing scandal," and to the Monitor's editor Richard Cattani about similar language used by a Monitor reporter.

Boxer also used the term, or whether this is Harrison's own "spin" on her comments. I find it difficult to believe that Boxer would inaccurately characterize her overdrafts as "bounced checks." On the other hand, I do not find it difficult to believe that Harrison, along with many other reporters, has succumbed to the lure of hype and scandal at the expense of fair reporting.


I suggest that the issue of journalistic integrity here is quite serious, and that reporters' misuse of "bounced checks" should not to be tossed off as an innocent infraction of a minor journalistic standard. I do not know the specific laws regarding bounced checks, but I do know that "check-bouncing" is considered to be theft, and if the sums are large enough, I am sure it is grand theft.

Use of this term in conjunction with such high incidences as Boxer's gives the impression that hundreds of small merchants and their families are going hungry while she merrily enjoys appliances, clothing, and jewelry she bought with bogus checks. The uncritical reader will assume that an "objective" reporter would not use such a loaded term unless it was accurate.

As editor of the Daily News, your role here is obvious: it is simply to disallow the use of inappropriate or biased terminology in supposedly "objective" reporting. Reporters who do not realize that they are slanting an issue with their language should be shown a better way.

I hope that you will see your way clear to contacting me soon with a response to my comments (hopefully before the election). I can be reached as shown below. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Bill Becker

cc: Sandy Harrison,
Sacramento Bureau

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RON KAYE
ASSISTANT MANAGING EDITOR/METRO

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October 23 1992

Dear Mr Becker

Your letter complaining about use of the terms "House bank," and "bounced checks" in an October 19 story was referred to me as the supervising editor for local news.

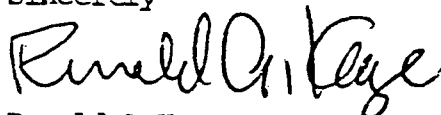
You certainly have a point, albeit it a small one. Use of the terms House bank and bounced checks have become part of this year's political vocabulary. A quick check of computer databases finds both terms have been used dozens of times by the Associated Press and Washington Post among many other news agencies as well as by members of Congress.

It appears from your letter that you do not share the widespread concern over the various abuses of power by officials that have been exposed in recent years. Nonetheless, the 143 bad checks written by Rep. Boxer and the thousands of others written by other members of Congress have come to symbolize this ethical malaise.

The House payroll office became known as the "bank" because it provided the services of a bank. The term "bounced checks" appears to have become popular because that is the common term for checks returned by the bank for insufficient funds. Of course, in this case the checks were not returned -- therefore there was no "bounce" -- but the phrase conveys in shorthand fashion the gist of what happened.

Perhaps, this shorthand is typical of the abuses of language committed by journalists. I hope you will be able to put these abuses in perspective.

Sincerely



Ronald A Kaye

RAK/ts

Ron Kaye,
Assistant Managing Editor/Metro
Daily News
November 4, 1992

Dear Mr. Kaye,

Thank you for replying to my letter to Mr. Burdick about the use of "bounced checks" in Sandy Harrison's article on the Boxer Herschensohn campaign. Let me say up front that I very much appreciate the openness with which Daily News editors discuss the issues I sometimes raise with them, and I certainly appreciated your own candor. I hope that this willingness to go "one-on-one" with readers does not become a casualty of the paper's increasing growth and success.

I know that you don't have time for lengthy dialogues with readers, and to begin such is not my intent with this letter. Here I simply want to point out two very serious errors you made in your response to me. I hope that you will give my comments your serious consideration--they are intended to help the Daily News to compete more effectively with the Los Angeles Times.

First, from a public relations angle, it is not a good idea to accuse a reader who disagrees with a journalistic practice or habit of "complaining." To say, as you do, that I am "complaining" about the use of "bounced checks" is to trivialize the issue up front. In discussions of serious issues, adults do not often use this term in referring to each other, because it has the negative connotation of "whining" commonly associated with children on long car trips or with the regular outbursts of eccentrics who seem to enjoy finding fault with everything, but who have no constructive alternatives to offer. (For example, "stop complaining" is almost exclusively said by an adult to a child.) In contrast to this familiar image, I made the thoroughly reasonable suggestion that Daily News reporters be instructed not to use this term when it did not apply. (I notice that Mike Comeaux's 10/26 article on Waxman did not use the term "bounced checks;" nor did your editorial supporting Herschensohn. Naturally, I like to think that my letter to Mr. Burdick had some influence.)

Here, the term tipped me off immediately that I must have struck a nerve. In fact, "complaining" could have been omitted entirely with no adverse effect. Or, let's say, "expressing your concern" should have been used instead.

More serious, though, is your accusation that I seem not to "share the widespread concern over the various abuses of power that have been exposed in recent years." It is simply bad policy to accuse people of not caring about such an important issue as the abuse of power (or corruption, moral decay, etc. ...) As its official spokesman here, you make no friends for the Daily News when you imply that someone who expresses concern over a "typical abuse

of language" (as you characterized the problem yourself) by its reporters is somehow morally inferior to those who so abuse the language. Let me remind you that instead of accusing Harrison of anti-Boxer/pro-Herschensohn bias, I suggested that he (she?) might have "succumbed" to mainstream journalism's clear proclivity to hype and scandal. Thus I am fairer to Harrison than you are to me.

In the future, I suggest that you treat everyone who writes to you as if they were your moral equal. You have nothing to lose by doing so, and will probably win (or at least keep) subscribers.

Your second major error lies in your understanding of the role of the Fourth Estate in a free society. (Here I will ignore the cynic's retort that the role of the Fourth Estate is simply to make money, although there is abundant evidence for that supposition.)

First, you are dead wrong in saying that my point is a "small one." I suggest that you read David Shaw's 3-part series (October 25-27, 1992) on the role of the mainstream media in determining what becomes news and what doesn't. In the first installment, Shaw devotes some 20 column-inches to the specific issue of the "banking scandal" and "bounced checks." Also, my friends and I are among thousands of others who are offended by the false implication that Representatives who wrote overdrafts are essentially criminals. This issue is not at all a "small matter."

Second, you simply cannot justify the misuse of "bounced checks" with the shop-worn excuse that "everyone else is doing it" (here meaning such mainstream giants as the Washington Post and AP). The arguments against this defense are so obvious that I need not even present them here. (I am surprised you didn't see it is a loser even as you wrote your response.) It amounts to saying that, journalistically speaking, the Daily News will take the same low road that everyone else does, even when there is no risk in taking the high road. The cynic might argue here that taking the high road would not sell as many papers, but I doubt that the Daily News would lose subscribers if it had refused to use "bounced checks," or even pointed out that no one who received an overdraft lost money.

Finally, let me suggest that you revealed a badly flawed understanding both of this so-called "scandal," and of the meanings of your own statements. You acknowledge that no checks bounced, but nevertheless go on immediately to say "the phrase conveys in shorthand fashion the gist of what happened." This assertion is totally without merit.

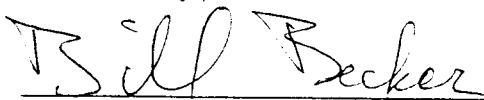
The "gist" of a "bounced check" is that it was returned to someone who received it as payment for value. That someone is thereby damaged, and must go through a time-consuming and often unsuccessful process to recover what is rightfully owed him or her. As I mentioned in my letter, this is the precise and only meaning

of "bounced check." Thus neither "bounced check," nor its synonym, "bad check," is applicable in this situation, even as a metaphor. The "gist" of what happened is that those who wrote overdrafts harmed no one, and that is the sum total of this "ethical malaise," as you put it.¹

Let me close by assuring you that I have indeed put the "typical abuses of language committed by journalists" in perspective. That perspective was expressed by Socrates in the Phaedo:

"Not only is the misuse of language distasteful to the ear, it is actually harmful to the soul."

Sincerely,



Bill Becker

cc: Bob Burdick
Tom Gray

¹ Your comment that "bounced checks" conveys the "gist of what happened" is similar to a view held by Representative Robert K. Dornan (R, California) as he revealed it when being questioned about his accusations that Bill Clinton traveled to the USSR as a guest of the KGB, and was ferried about in a limousine as incentive to lead demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

"Dornan conceded that he was merely speculating, having gathered no evidence to support the foregoing account. Asked if it was responsible to just make things up, the congressman nodded vigorously.

'When you feel in your gut that the scenario is true--yes,' he said, 'Yes!'" Milwaukee Sentinel, October 8, 1992. (Washington Post wire)

This kind of an attitude is reprehensible even in a politician; in journalists it is a downright danger to the country.

OCTOBER 8, 1992

Relentless: Clinton-basher keeps going

Washington Post

Washington, D.C. — Sometimes Rep. Robert K. Dornan's bristling red beard makes him look like his face is on fire.

This is especially true when he's standing in the well of the House of Representatives, trying to aim a rhetorical flamethrower at his nemesis, Bill Clinton.

These days, that's practically always.

Since late July, when the California Republican launched a series of scorching tirades against the Democratic presidential nominee — "arrogant fraud" and "draft-dodging adulterer" were among his kinder and gentler epithets — Dornan has established himself as by far the most vituperative of Clinton's detractors in Congress.

On several nights in the last weeks of the session that just ended, he kept the House in session long after the close of business to deliver hourlong orations — known as "special orders" — in which he has ranted in vintage Dornan style about the Arkansas governor's morals, veracity, courage, patriotism and even his academic performance

"He is, fortunately, a reverse E.F. Hutton. When he speaks, no one listens." — DENNIS ECKART
Democratic representative from Ohio

while a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University in the late 1960s.

"The more I've studied Clinton — and I've really hunkered down and studied him for the last two months," Dornan said, patting a pile of dog-eared clippings and papers spread out on a table in the Capitol, "the more I've come to disrespect everything he stands for on the character issue." He added that Clinton has a "50-50" chance of becoming president — "which nauseates me."

Lately Dornan has been trying to make hay out of Clinton's trip to Moscow in early 1970 — he went, like many American students, as a tourist, the Clinton campaign says — and claimed in an interview that Clinton traveled there as a guest of the KGB, which

ferried him about in a limousine, in order to inspire him to organize demonstrations against the Vietnam War.

Dornan conceded that he was merely speculating, having gathered no evidence to support the foregoing account. Asked if it was responsible to just make things up, the congressman nodded vigorously.

"When you feel in your gut that the scenario is true — yes," he said. "Yes!"

In the process, this 59-year-old former fighter pilot in the peacetime Air Force — dubbed "B-1 Bob" for relentlessly championing the B-1 bomber — has pushed the edge of the envelope on the House's cherished traditions of comity and collegiality.

"He is, fortunately, a reverse E.F. Hutton," said Rep. Dennis Eckart (D-Ohio). "When he speaks, no one listens."

"He's a lying lunatic — but entertaining," said George Stephanopoulos, the Clinton campaign's communications director. "We don't spend a lot of time worrying about what he's saying."