

Free Press Viewpoint

Postal Service crisis digs in even deeper

The sound you hear would be the U.S. Postal Service shooting itself in the foot – again.

Wracked by deficits and loss of its most profitable business, the service acts like it just wants to get things over with. The postal Board of Governors has filed for an “exigent,” or emergency, rate increase that would bump the price of a First Class stamp up by 3 cents to 49 cents per Christmas card. That’s around 6.5 percent, more than four times the rate of inflation.

Christmas cards are about all the agency will have left in the First-Class bin. The service has lost more than 30 percent of its First Class business in the last five years, and the increase seems calculated to drive off much of what’s left.

Businesses are pushing electronic billing and payment. Even the federal government, which supposedly supports the Postal Service, is trying to force Social Security and other recipients to take electronic payments. E-mail and instant messaging have replaced most personal and business communication.

What happened? It’s been less than a decade, after all, since the Postal Service was a growing, profitable enterprise.

The Great Recession accelerated every trend, depriving the service of the growth it needed. That, exposed flaws in the service’s business and the federal law that governs it.

When it passed “comprehensive postal reform” legislation in 2006, Congress saddled the service with a requirement to prepay the medical benefits of future retirees, something no other agency must do. That \$5.5 billion payment hangs around the postmaster general’s neck like an albatross today.

The same law limits postal rate increases to no more than the rate of inflation – currently about 1.5 percent – barring an emergency. With the service headed for a \$5 billion loss for the year ending Sept. 30, despite billions in cost cutting, and its cash nearly gone, postal officials say that time is here.

The service believes it will generate \$2 billion from its proposed rate hike, which must be approved by the Postal Regulator Commission, drawing heavy opposition. It’s likely, however, that the end result of a big jump in mail costs will be to drive more mail from the system – not just letter mail, but periodicals and the advertising the service sees as its salvation.

The agency has been scrambling to cut costs, closing 104 postal sorting “plants,” slashing hours, eliminating more than 1,100 carrier routes and cutting expenses by nearly \$4 billion this year. It’s three years delinquent on the payment for retirees – and still paying into the federal system and Medicare for many postal workers.

Officials say many of the service’s problems would go away if Congress could just pass a new “comprehensive postal reform” law and let it change its business plan to meet market challenges. But the two houses have quite different bills, and there’s been little movement on a compromise. The effort could be stuck behind the farm bill and immigration reform, waiting for the postal situation to come to a real crisis.

That might happen any day, since the service was due to make a \$1.4 billion payment to the Labor Department to cover worker compensation claims this month.

And while the agency might get relief from prepayment, it’s still tied up in politics, a tradition of granting unions whatever they want and management slashing service to cut costs.

Congress, which has known for at least five years that it needs to do something, has not acted, and probably won’t until the agency flat runs out of cash. It’s one more case of gridlock in Washington, something the American people should be tired of. – *Steve Haynes*

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Month of recipes strictly impractical

A month of recipes. You’ve got to be kidding me. Who eats this stuff, anyway?

First, a confession – I’m overwhelmed with magazines.

I love a good magazine and have subscribed to three or four for years now. But over the past year, I’ve bought a couple more I like on the newsstand and decided to subscribe. Then there came the offers – \$8 for a year’s worth, plus give a free subscription to a friend. Who could pass that up?

Now I’m getting an average of three a week, and I can’t read that fast.

They pile up. They mock me. Which to look at first?

And most of them are food based – *Cook’s Illustrated*, *Saveur*, *Real Simple*, *Food & Wine*, *Southern Living*, *Bon Appétit*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman’s Day*, *Family Circle*, *Taste of Home* – the list goes on.

My pile of ripped-out recipes would feed the world.

However, what really intrigues me is the “month of recipes” features some of them push. Who has a family that would eat all this stuff? Or a grocery that sells some of those ingredients.

Steve and I have a list of stuff each of us won’t eat, and some that neither of us will touch. I don’t like seafood or much of any fish,



Cynthia Haynes

• Open Season

liver, lamb, mushrooms or cooked greens. Steve dislikes bananas, cauliflower and peas. Neither of us will eat brussels sprouts, ever.

A recent magazine offered me recipes for:

- Crunchy dinner salad with prosciutto, apple and hazelnuts, which requires a small head of radicchio and three ounces of prosciutto – not in the produce bin, or the meat case, of my store.

- Lamb chops and parsnip puree with coriander brown butter – parsnip puree doesn’t even sound good.

- Seared fish with tomatoes and garlicky escarole – even if the store had the required escarole and halibut, I wouldn’t eat it.

- Chicken thighs with potatoes and brussels sprouts – what’s with this trendy fixation on thighs and dark meat anyway?

- Salmon and savoy cabbage hash – I like hash, but there doesn’t seem to be any corned beef in the recipe.

- Slow cooker beef ragu with basil gremolata – this actually has beef and ingredients that sounded pretty good, but what the heck is gremolata?

- Spaghetti with turkey meatballs – Why? What’s wrong with good ol’ ground beef?

- Coconut-chicken soup with chilies and lime – not happening.

- Roasted cauliflower with currant-parlised sauce – see the list of what Steve won’t eat. And if a recipe has no meat in it, it better have cheese and/or eggs, and this has none of the above.

Well, you get the idea. Out of a month of recipes, I might – and I emphasize the might – rip one or two out. I’ll probably never make them, but I’d be willing to add them to the leaning tower of “Oh that sounds good. Maybe I’ll try it sometime.”

PS: If any of these sound good to you, by all means buy the October issue of *Real Simple*. Just don’t invite me to supper.

Cynthia Haynes, co-owner and chief financial officer of Nor'West Newspapers, writes this column weekly. Her pets include cats, toads and a praying mantis. Contact her at c.haynes@nwkansas.com

Congress needs to monitor eavesdroppers

Congress has some challenging work ahead. It needs to restore the proper balance between effective intelligence-gathering and intrusion into Americans’ privacy.

Washington is beginning to debate the proper extent of government eavesdropping powers in the wake of Edward Snowden’s revelations about the National Security Agency, the spy agency that handles world-wide electronic eavesdropping. It’s hardly as robust a discussion as it should be, but it’s a desperately needed start.

The colossal effort to monitor Americans’ communications has been going on for at least seven years, under two presidents. It constitutes an expansion of government power without precedent in the modern era. Yet while some members of Congress were informed about it – and all had the opportunity to learn – none saw an urgent need for public discussion. This is astounding. It took the actions of a leaker to spur any real airing of the matter on Capitol Hill.

Even now, it seems unlikely that Congress will make significant policy changes. That’s because all the nation’s key actors and institutions appear to approve of the surveillance programs. By its silence, Congress clearly supported them.

Presidents Bush and Obama backed them. The intelligence community, a powerful voice on national security issues, has resolutely defended them. The special court that is supposed to keep them in line with the Constitution have been deferential to authorities, raising a few questions from time to time, but in the end approving all but a handful of tens of thousands of data-gathering requests.

And the American people, by their lack of widespread outrage, have signaled that in this one case, at least, they believe the government can be trusted to keep us safe.

In short, Congress – the forum where issues

Other Opinions

• Lee Hamilton
Center on Congress

of such national importance should be hashed out – missed its chance to lead a reasoned debate over how extensive we want surveillance over American communications to be. It’s unlikely that genie can ever again be forced back into its bottle.

Yet even the director of national intelligence, James Clapper – who once denied point-blank to Congress that the government collects data on millions of Americans – now sees the need for some sort of change.

“We can do with more oversight and give people more confidence in what we do,” he said in a mid-September speech.

Yes, indeed. Here’s the problem: once given power, the government rarely yields it. So you have to think not only about its present use, but how it will be used a decade or even more from now. Even if you concede that the current administration and its intelligence leadership have been responsible stewards of the powers they’ve been given – and I don’t – that is no guarantee that the people who follow them, or the people who come after that, will be equally trustworthy.

This means that Congress has some challenging work ahead. It needs to restore the proper balance between effective intelligence-gathering and intrusion into Americans’ privacy. It needs to demand more thorough accountability from the intelligence community. It needs to exercise greater oversight and insist on more transparency, more information

and more constraint on surveillance programs – defining what is truly relevant to an investigation, creating more stringent definitions of which communications are fair game, and finding ways to assure Americans that protecting their privacy and civil liberties need not mean the wholesale vacuuming-up of every domestic phone and e-mail record in existence.

There is no place for the timidity Congress has shown so far on these issues.

Our system depends on a vigorous Congress. The administration argues that it can provide rigorous intelligence-gathering oversight, but it has yet to prove it can do so – and in our system of checks and balances, it’s not enough to have one branch of government overseeing itself. Congress, the courts, and the presidentially appointed Privacy and Civil Liberties Board all have to step up to their responsibilities.

Americans should demand action to strike a better balance between privacy and security. In the past, the congressional overseers of the intelligence community have been captivated, if not captured, by the people they’re supposed to be supervising. Same with the courts. And the administration has hardly been forthcoming. That means it’s up to the American people to insist that our leaders do their jobs. It’s no less true today than it was at our founding: the price of liberty is eternal vigilance.

Lee Hamilton is director of the Center on Congress at Indiana University. He was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 34 years.

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Mallard Fillmore

• Bruce Tinsley

