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# The Founders never intended the U.S. Postal Service to be managed like a business

The mail delivery agency is supposed to serve the public good — not worry about profit



A mail carrier wearing a protective mask has packages yet to deliver in Hawthorne, Calif., April 20. (Patrick T. Fallon/Bloomberg)



By **Richard R. John**

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To combat the [coronavirus](#), Congress has seemingly tried to bail out everyone: Millions of individuals, airlines, restaurants, retail businesses and even golf courses are among the beneficiaries of the government's largesse.

But so far, one struggling institution has come up empty: the U.S. Postal Service. On Friday, President Trump threatened to block a loan to the Postal Service, calling it "a joke" and [demanding](#) postal administrators raise the price of packages by "approximately four times," before [tweeting later](#) that he would "never let our Post Office fail."

Trump's intransigence is a startling departure from precedent. From the 1850s until the 1960s, Congress routinely covered whatever deficits the Postal Service incurred — no matter how large — and with little controversy, partisanship or debate. Why? Because the Postal Service was a public service, whose rationale was civic rather than commercial. As a New York journalist put it in 1854: The Postal Service's "benefit to mankind" far outweighed the "pecuniary consideration" of any financial shortfall. In 1958, a federal law made this even clearer: The Postal Service was "clearly not a business enterprise conducted for profit."

To justify his threat, Trump claimed the Postal Service [has been](#) "mismanaged for years, especially since the advent of the Internet and modern-day technology," which renders it less worthy of support than an ordinary business. This is a profound misunderstanding of the Postal Service's DNA.

The Founders intended the Postal Service to be a pillar of the republic, binding together millions of Americans, urban and rural, for the common good. It therefore always had congressional oversight limiting what management can do to make a profit. Rather than being mismanaged, the Postal Service is — and has long been — one of America's great successes. Instead of privatizing it, we should take inspiration from the Founders and re-envision its mission for the 21st century.

Before 1792, the Postal Service was basically a carbon copy of the imperial post office British colonial administrators had set up decades before the War of Independence. Little more than a chain of offices along the Atlantic seaboard — today known as the "Old Post Road" — it provided no special facilities for the press and served at best a tiny percentage of the public — mostly merchants, professionals and government officials.

The Postal Service Act of 1792 changed everything, investing the Postal Service with an expansive civic mission. While the law had no ringing preamble, it was at least as important as the First Amendment in laying the groundwork for free institutions. The act established mechanisms for rapid expansion from the seaboard into the hinterland, ultimately creating a continent-spanning postal network. This information infrastructure facilitated the rise of a nationwide market, the invention of the mass political party and the proliferation of nationally oriented voluntary associations. With the Postal Service, Congress created the world French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville would laud as the world's first democracy when he visited the United States in 1831.

Most critically, the act subsidized the circulation of newspapers throughout the country on a nonpreferential basis and at extremely low cost. Not only pro-government ideas but also anti-government ideas could circulate throughout the length and breadth of the republic. Before 1792, newspapers had been officially excluded from the mail; after 1792, they circulated in numbers unmatched by any other country in the world.

For James Madison, the low-cost nonpreferential circulation of newspapers was a political imperative. By helping Americans speak truth to power, House Speaker Jonathan Trumbull Jr. proclaimed the Postal Service “among the surest means of preventing the degeneracy of a free people.” President George Washington went so far as to propose unsuccessfully that every newspaper go in the mail free of charge. For the Founders, a well-informed citizenry, not profit-making for even letter delivery, was the reason the Postal Service was so crucial to the future of the republic.

The 19th-century Postal Service circulated information indispensable for commerce, public affairs and personal matters throughout the country and around the world rapidly, accurately and at low cost. No other organization of any kind came close to its achievement.

The combination of expansive mission and oversight from Congress also meant deficits were to be expected. Low-cost circulation of all of these periodicals was expensive. Rather than arouse ire, however, Americans — Democrats and Republicans alike — preferred this deficit-running operation to its rivals. Telegraph giant Western Union was widely reviled in its post-Civil War heyday for its narrow business strategy and reliance on what we would today call fake news to beat back calls for reform. In fact, countless reformers in the 1880s wanted the Postal Service to take over Western Union and run it in accordance with the egalitarian “post office principle” — access for all, at low cost, without regard to the expense. Civic ideals trumped any consideration of the bottom line. Pundits have it wrong; not the telegraph, but the Postal Service, was the true Victorian Internet. The telegraph catered to an upscale urban clientele; the Postal Service provided cheap and convenient service for the entire population.

This history explains just how misguided most of today’s criticisms of the Postal Service are. The Postal Service is not failing to compete with its rivals because of mismanagement. To the contrary, postal administrators have innovated in many realms, from railway mail and farm-to-home delivery to commercial aviation and optical scanning. Never, however, and certainly not today, have they been able to operate independently of stringent regulatory oversight. Additionally, the post-1792 Postal Service was not intended primarily to deliver letters. If it had been, one might plausibly argue that it had become anachronistic in an age in which billions of emails circulate around the world at instantaneous speed. But while the mail bags once were stuffed full of newspapers and magazines, in recent years they are increasingly filled with packages essential to civic well-being in the 21st century.

In fact, the Postal Service today works closely with Fed Ex, Amazon (Jeff Bezos is both the chief executive of Amazon and the owner of The Washington Post) and UPS to ensure goods of all kinds reach their intended destination — especially over the “last mile” between the long-distance carrier and the home or office — which is extremely

expensive to serve. Without the Postal Service, countless Americans — including, in particular, those living in the vast rural hinterland — would pay far more for all kinds of shipments, including prescription drugs.

Rather than pushing for privatization — a move that might well oblige online behemoths such as Amazon or Walmart to consider buying up postal assets at bargain basement prices — public officials mindful of the wisdom of the Founders might well consider expanding the ambit of the Postal Service to include high-tech “last mile” capabilities: the reestablishment of a low-cost consumer banking system, a popular service the Postal Service maintained for much of the 20th century, or even the rollout of a low-cost municipal broadband. Rural electrification transformed vast swaths of the hinterland; might not rural Postal Services be configured as hubs for the digital economy of tomorrow? The Postal Service also will play a crucial role in ensuring trustworthy mail balloting, a major issue in the age of covid-19.

The Postal Service remains the most admired federal government institution — recent polls put its popularity around 90 percent. It provides good jobs at a living wage to 500,000 people, including a disproportionate number of veterans and African Americans. Public figures in a democracy should not be so dismissive of the public will or of an institution that has for so long served the country well. Nor should they forget the Postal Service’s original mission or the wisdom of the Founders.

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. If anything, now is time to re-envision the long-successful mission of the post office for a new age.

**21 Comments**



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