

Saving the Post Office

By Mel Lavine

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The other day a friend clipped a cartoon for me. It shows a mother telling her kids that the newspaper is reporting the government may stop delivering letters on Saturday. One child, sitting at a laptop, asks, "What's a letter?" The other, fiddling with an iPod, asks, "What's a newspaper?"

As my friend suspected, the irony was likely to strike a chord, and it did. Even though I jumped ship many years ago to work in television, the newspaper remains for me the heart and soul of the business

I also have a soft spot for the post office which, I see, may have to cut Saturday mail delivery and a good deal more to make ends meet. Years ago, when I was between jobs as a newspaperman, the post office was a place to come in from the cold.

In the early 1950s I found work as a mail handler in San Francisco before a reporter's job came through. Some years later, down and out and married and trying my hand at free-lance writing, I found work as a clerk and letter-carrier in Santa Cruz. I stayed on for a couple of years before I realized my place was in a newsroom.

In more recent times, because of declining mail volume and reforms, the Postal Service was transformed from a taxpayer-supported institution into a "revenue neutral" agency that is expected to pay for itself, as the Nation magazine points out in its current issue. Last year the Postal Service recorded a \$3.8 billion loss and some estimates project an ever-rising deficit climbing into the billions in multiples by 2020.

Because the post office is looking for places to cut in its budget, businesses, fearful of less service and rising costs, are coaxing customers to pay bills electronically, e-mail documents, and shop on the Web.

So, one hears people asking, is the post office really necessary in an age of ultra-speed Internet? I say yes. It is one of the few institutions – and the oldest of American major public services established by decree of the Continental Congress and, incidentally, promoted by Benjamin Franklin – that retains a human face. Hundreds of millions of Americans rely on the local post office. In neighborhoods and small towns it is the heart of the community.

The post office is a life line for half the country's rural population. It delivers the mail to every corner of America, and goes to great lengths so that no one is left out, even in wilderness areas where the mail, food and supplies are delivered by bush planes and by mule trains on the floor of the Grand Canyon for native Americans.

My fear is that like so much else that our government used to do for our taxes, and do quite well, the Postal Service may one day be privatized by a Washington in the coils of Wall Street. That would be a very sad day for our democracy. As the Nation magazine says, "the Postal Service should be re-imagined – not shrunk."

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