

# Blinded by the fight



**T**hese days, the partisan divide in Washington seems to be worse than ever, though I'm sure there have been times in our history when the strife has been far more evident. No doubt the political warfare over slavery before the Civil War certainly was, as were the political battles over the New Deal in the 1930s. Still, everywhere you look, there appears to be gridlock; every debate is an angry one, and every vote in Congress is a cliffhanger.

For example, as I write this, the Senate is now into the fourth week of a GOP filibuster on a House-passed bill to extend unemployment insurance benefits to more than 2 million desperate Americans whose benefits have run out. At a time when half of the 15 million officially unemployed have been out of work for more than six months (a record) and when there are five job-seekers for every job vacancy (also a record), this level of heartless partisanship is hard to fathom—especially from political leaders who bear so much responsibility for causing the current economic crisis.

Yes, the deficit *is* a concern, but punishing the jobless today is as foolish as it is mean-spirited. It could turn a weak recovery into a double-dip recession, and it could make the deficit worse. Many prominent Republicans actually claim that extending benefits will prolong the recession by discouraging job-hunting. That's preposterous—as if scraping by on \$300 a week is preferable to having a decent job. These politicians are so consumed by the political fight that they will literally say anything to win it.

**It's not just the politicians, either. To sell** its five-day mail delivery plan, Postal Service management used deceptive public opinion polls to help make its case. The surveys asked people whether they prefer a postage increase or the loss of a day of delivery. They were devised to get a predictable (though it turned out small) majority to back the plan. It made people think they had a choice. The pollsters failed to mention that the USPS was going to pursue the elimination of Saturday delivery *and* a rate increase at the same time. Anything to win, I guess.

The blind fury to win was also evident when the Service filed its case with the Postal Regulatory Commission in July for an “exigent” (emergency) rate increase. The hired guns of some of America's biggest mailers made fools of themselves in their effort to block the proposed 5.6 percent increase.

First, they suggested that the worst financial crisis and recession in 80 years does not meet the standard of “extraordinary and exceptional” circumstances, and then they brazenly tried to rewrite the history of the exigency rate provision by suggesting such circumstances were limited to emergencies such as the 2001 anthrax crisis. They are even lying about it on a website set up by a group calling itself the Affordable Mail Alliance.

And that's not all they are lying about. They are suggesting that the Postal Service and the postal unions have failed to take the “tough actions” necessary to respond to the crisis—as if the USPS had not slashed billions in labor costs since the recession began by eliminating more than 100,000 jobs, or as if the NALC had not worked tirelessly to adjust routes to align with fluctuating mail volumes.

One of the mailers' representatives even claimed that the 6 percent rise in postal wage rates since the recession began (about 2 percent per year) was somehow outrageous—even though the independent Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that overall wage rates in the economy rose by even more than that since the fourth quarter of 2007, between 6.7 and 6.9 percent.

But winning seems paramount, even if it means trashing the employees who uphold the brand and who underpin the trust Americans have in the U.S. Postal Service.

**Letter carriers have a message for the blindly partisan: *Snap out of it.*** In the immediate future, Congress should focus on reducing mass unemployment, while postal management and the mailers should focus on recovering the USPS pension surplus in CSRS, on reforming the retiree health pre-funding provisions mandated by law, and on working with us to build new services.

Recovery, reform and revenues are the keys to the Postal Service's revival. ☒