It doesn't add up

Truth fears no questions. However, the truth is not always the best way to support a position that you have taken. So when the questions come, the dance to avoid that truth begins.

Politicians are famous for answering questions without really answering them. Usually by the time they are done rambling, you have actually forgotten what the question was to begin with. I think they should be required to finish each response with "does that answer your question?" Uh, nope.

It all reminds me of one of my favorite movie lines. It's the answer Pinocchio gives to Prince Charming when he asks where Shrek is in "Shrek the Third." Pinocchio's response: "I don't know where he's not."

Even better is Pinocchio's answer to the follow-up question: "I'm possibly more or less not definitely rejecting the idea that in no way with any amount of uncertainty that I undeniably do or do not know where he should probably be, if that indeed wasn't where he isn't." Tap, tap, tappety, tap. Does that answer your question, Charming? Uh, maybe?

But when someone is testifying in front of Congress under oath, the dance gets a little harder to do if you are trying to avoid that inconvenient truth. In fact, it can end up being impossible.

In April, Postmaster General John E. Potter was one of five witnesses required to testify before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. The hearing was held to examine three recently issued reports, each addressing the problems facing the Postal Service as well as potential solutions.

The first report was produced by the USPS Office of Inspector General (OIG), which found that the Postal Service was overcharged $75 billion by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) for CSRS pension benefits for postal employees. The second was the Postal Service's report: "Ensuring a Viable Postal Service for America: An Action Plan for the Future." And the third was a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report to Congress entitled "Strategies and Options to Facilitate Progress Toward Financial Viability."

After opening testimony, members of the House Committee are allowed to ask questions of the witnesses. This is the point where these congressional hearings usually get interesting, and this one did not disappoint. They asked Potter the $238 billion question: How real is that number?

In fact, several members raised many questions about the validity of the Postal Service's projection of a $238 billion shortfall over the next 10 years and the claim that elimination of Saturday delivery is essential to its future viability.

Potter was forced to admit that the numbers in the Postal Service's action plan were based on worst-case scenarios. In fact, Potter had told the committee in his opening statement that he had a plan that would already cut the projected number more than in half.

Rep. Gerry Connolly (D-VA) grilled both Potter and Phillip Herr of the GAO about the projected loss of $238 billion in both their reports. Connolly asked of Herr: "So how real is the $238 billion number that's been bantered in testimony here and in the press? I mean, one begins to conclude it has no basis in fact at all other than to scare people."

Herr responded that the number was simply a starting point, one that the Postal Service came up with. (Now, wait a minute: The GAO was supposed to do its *own* report.) Herr stated it was an "illustrative case of not doing anything."

Potter was then asked to respond to Herr's statement. Potter said he agreed, which prompted this question from Connolly: "You'd have to assume for the $238 billion to be real, we (Congress) would have to do nothing—including you. You've already said you are going to use the authority you have to make reductions totaling $123 billion. Is that correct?"

Potter's reply: "That's correct."

Connolly than stated: "So the $238 billion number is already not real."

Said Potter: "It's a theoretical number."

Connolly's follow-up: "A theoretical number. Except that you've already announced here you're taking steps to make sure that theoretical number is never real."

Potter's answer: "Exactly."

Does that answer your question? Uh, yes. ✉