

To explain today's Washington, go ask Alice about Wonderland



These days, Washington feels a lot like Wonderland. Our nation's politics have gone through the looking glass. Blind ideology and childish illogic have replaced reason and dialogue. Compromise is a dirty word. And a determined know-nothingness appears to have taken hold in the House of Representatives.

How else to explain that the majority party in the House is threatening to turn America into a banana republic, and possibly plunge the world economy into a new crisis, by refusing to raise the nation's debt ceiling? For the first time in the 235 years of our great country, we are actually debating whether to question the full faith and credit of the United States.

And House leaders are doing this with no sense of irony or shame. Imagine refusing to raise the debt limit just weeks after passing a radical budget (the infamous Ryan plan) that mandates tax cuts and annual deficits over the next 10 years, adding \$5 trillion to the national debt. Having doubled down on the very policies that led to the 2008 crash—more tax cuts, more deregulation and a new round of attacks on the middle class—the House won't authorize the debt it just voted for. The Red Queen would be proud.

But this is not child's play. The Ryan budget has targeted our pensions and our health benefits, not to mention the promise of dignity in retirement that comes with a Medicare program we can count on. It has no real chance to become law, at least not before the 2012 elections, but that doesn't mean the toxic ideas it holds cannot reach out and hurt us.

House leaders have sought to back the president into a corner to advance their partisan aims: Cut the spending we want to cut, or else we'll force a default on the national debt. In talks with the president and vice president, the Republicans are demanding a pound of flesh from federal and postal employees in a spending-only deficit reduction plan.

Point out that reckless tax cuts over the past 10 years explain the largest part of the

deficit or ask the Wall Street bandits who crashed the economy to pay their fair share, and the House leaders run screaming from the room. Ask for some balance, or mention that federal tax revenues are at their lowest level in 50 years, and they plug their ears in defiance. Suggest that hedge fund managers should not pay less in taxes than letter carriers, and they will accuse you of waging class war. The White Rabbit is running loose on Capitol Hill.

Leave aside the question of whether the focus should be on the huge jobs crisis instead of near-term deficit reduction—is this any way to run a great country?

Sadly, it doesn't stop there. Now the congressional GOP is targeting the USPS as well. As this issue went to press, the chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, Darrell Issa (R-CA), was attempting to strip the six-day delivery requirement from a bill the Appropriations Committee passed unanimously through the Rules Committee. We are pulling out all the stops to prevent it.

This follows Issa's introduction of a bill in June that would be funny if it weren't so misguided. He is a former businessman and the richest member of the House. Yet he drafted the most anti-business bill imaginable. It seems he dislikes unions and the government so much that he would endanger the \$1.3 trillion mailing industry and the 7.5 million private-sector jobs it supports just to make an ideological point. There is no other way to interpret H.R. 2309, the Postal Reform Act of 2011. Just as the Ryan budget bill would destroy Medicare as we know it, the Issa bill would destroy the Postal Service as we know it.

The legislation, which is co-sponsored by House postal subcommittee Chairman Dennis Ross (R-FL), would eliminate Saturday delivery (along with 25,000 city carrier jobs) and thereby fundamentally undermine the USPS. And rather than seek to avert a financial crisis by addressing the root cause of the Postal Service's financial distress—the unaffordable mandate to massively pre-fund future

retiree health benefits—the Issa-Ross bill seeks to exploit the crisis to dramatically downsize the Postal Service in the most extraordinary way.

A Commission on Postal Reorganization would be appointed to mandate massive post office closings and a complete restructuring of the USPS mail-processing networks to meet an arbitrary goal of \$3 billion in annual savings. Knowing that the USPS says that it cannot make its next \$5.5 billion pre-funding payment, the bill would authorize the creation of a kind of financial control board for the USPS if the agency fails to make any scheduled payment. The so-called Postal Service Financial Responsibility and Management Assistance Authority would have the power to rewrite our collective-bargaining agreements to meet new anti-union standards stuffed into the law with a goal of imposing massive wage and benefit cuts.

Again, the irony is palpable. The free-market-loving Rep. Issa would set up two new unelected government boards and empower them to dictate a top-down, command and control take-over of the Postal Service. The postmaster general, the Board of Governors and the postal unions would be shunted aside in favor of political appointees with no knowledge of the Postal Service or its mission. Issa and Ross completely ignored the solution offered by H.R. 1351, the bi-partisan bill that would actually give the Postal Service a fighting chance to survive—a bill that has overwhelming support among the thousands of businesses that partner with the Postal Service every day. Mindless ideology trumps common sense. The Mad Hatter would be pleased.

A crazy bill such as the Issa measure, like the Ryan budget, normally would have no chance of passage. But we live in crazy times—when the Speaker of the House can irresponsibly suggest that raising the debt limit is “not my problem.”

Compounding our vulnerability is the fact that the Postal Service’s finances have taken a decided turn for the worse in recent months. A suddenly slowing economy, a

return to rising unemployment and a continued housing slump hit First Class mail volume hard in the third quarter of the fiscal year, reversing the improvement seen at the end of 2010.

Of course, in terms of its negative impact on the USPS bottom line, the recent contraction in revenue pales in comparison to the red ink caused by the mandate to pre-fund future retiree health benefits. But in the current political environment, a fiscal crisis in September poses a dire threat to our jobs and our future.

Fortunately, we are not helpless. We have a great union and we have each other to fight back. NALC officers and staff are working around the clock, with thousands of state and branch activists at our side, to defend our jobs and our future. We are waging a spirited battle in the nation’s news media—as the Postal Facts page on our website attests.

We have many good friends in Washington who have not succumbed to the ignorance and fear—in the administration and in both parties in Congress. Indeed, we now have 170 bipartisan co-sponsors of both H.R. 1351 (the pre-funding fix) and 172 for H. Res. 137 (the six-day delivery resolution). And we have a lot of public support—an 83 percent approval rating for the USPS in a recent Pew Research poll.

Nonetheless, the scale of the threat is so large that we need every letter carrier to step up in this most dangerous of times. We need every carrier to become an e-Activist today. Not tomorrow—*today*. Fill out the enclosed card and mail it back to NALC Headquarters—and then act when I contact you to take urgent action. Get to your branch meetings. Volunteer as a Carrier Corps member, and visit the NALC website and activist blog each day. Stand up for our rights as letter carriers and as workers.

I still have a lot of faith in our democracy. Today’s topsy-turvy politics won’t last forever. Alice survived her Wonderland, just as we will survive ours. Let’s make sure that the honorable work we do and the job we love survives, too. ☒