

Letter from the Editor

A long time ago (1965 to be precise), the Rolling Stones released “The Singer Not the Song,” a catchy and underrated recording whose title evokes an advantage we bring as we fight for our rights and our very livelihood against those who seek to restrict both.

Let’s paraphrase that title as “The Messenger Not the Message.”

Don’t get me wrong. Our message, which has been discussed in this space in previous months, is powerful: The United States Postal Service is profitable in operational terms, it uses no taxpayer money, and Congress could resolve the pre-funding issue by approving an internal transfer.

So yes, the facts are on our side, and exposing people to these truths is critical. But facts by themselves don’t win arguments. People win arguments. The personal credibility one brings to the effort, authoritativeness in speaking about the topic at hand, coming across as a real person and not a detached analyst, possessing the street smarts to know how to persuade a given audience—whether thousands of radio listeners or a single neighbor—all weigh heavily.

We’re not making our case before a panel of judges who will retreat to their chambers and pore over legal briefs. We’re making it to folks on Main Street, to reporters, to legislators—and the outcome will be affected by whether they find the messenger credible. Influencing opinions depends in large measure on who is making the argument.

Doubt this? Try to imagine someone other than Martin Luther King delivering the “I Have a Dream” speech. Had your local congressman given that speech, its shelf life might have been three days, not 47 years and counting. Read it on paper and it comes across as a well-cobbled address; in real life, it moved a vast nation. The personal journey King traveled on his way to the Lincoln Memorial, the moral urgency he brought to the task, the preacher’s cadence that marked his delivery—these things transformed it from a strong argument to a seminal event in American history.


I thought of all this as I watched anti-labor forces try to use last month’s congressional hearing to discredit the recent agreement between the USPS and the American Postal Workers Union and to denigrate collective bargaining itself. Without downplaying the

danger these ideologues pose and the importance of changing the political makeup of Congress, they were clearly blown out of the water by our allies and advocates. They came armed with a script, but what they encountered made them look petty. APWU President Cliff Guffey, a disabled Vietnam veteran, noted the high proportion of vets in the postal workforce. Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe, labor’s bargaining adversary, praised union contributions to USPS efficiency. Several legislators, representing the American people, cited the outstanding public service provided by postal employees.

Faced with such powerful testimony from credible sources, our foes seemed a good deal smaller in stature, their scripted words suddenly ringing hollow.

I think of this when I see Fred Rolando interviewed. What comes across to the listener, every bit as much as his words, is the persona of the man: This is, clearly, someone who speaks from core beliefs based on extensive professional experience, not from talking points, which lends enormous credence to what he says. And I think of it when NALC officers or activists around the country are on local media programs and hosts and callers display respect from the outset. These things make a difference.

Flash back, if you will, to Iowa 2004. In the state’s Democratic presidential caucus, Sen. John Kerry lagged badly in the polls. But on caucus night, he garnered more votes than the two favorites combined, and went on to win the nomination. The key was the behind-the-scenes work of a mere 2,400 Iowa firefighters whose impact was multiplied by public respect, their knowledge of local communities, the discipline and homogeneity of their union, and, by dint of their profession, their presence throughout the state.

Sound familiar? As letter carriers, you are among the most highly regarded folks in your local communities; indeed, you’re the country’s most trusted federal workers. People see you and your work six days a week. As a result, you bring inherent credibility to the discussion of postal issues. So, a few well-chosen words to friends and neighbors and fellow residents will go a long way. You have powerful voices if you use them. There may never be a better time. 



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