

Plus ça change...



**Philip
Dine**

There's a popular saying in France, where I spent two years, that goes like this: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. It means: The more things change, the more they remain the same. It's used so much that it's shorthanded as *Plus ça change...*

That phrase came to mind recently when I discovered, while going through some old papers, a copy of *Washington Monthly* (a magazine on U.S. politics and government) from July/August of 1989.

The cover features a picture of a letter carrier placed in a large valentine, next to the words "Why Americans Love Letter Carriers," and the 10-page story was written by one of the maga-

zine's editors. The article in this normally take-no-prisoners Washington publication introduces letter carriers as "...the person who hands you your mail with a smile, who braves fires and foils criminals to rescue the feeble and frail."

The article mentions a letter carrier in Indiana who saved the lives of two elderly people in two separate incidents in a single day. It calls NALC President Vincent Sombrotto a "union statesman." And it quotes the director of the USPS' office of consumer complaints as saying, "The carrier is viewed as a national icon."

Much in American society has changed over the past quarter-century. When that cover story was published, the attacks of 9/11 and the changes they wrought were a dozen years away—and they were unimaginable, as was the level of political and ideological bitterness to which Washington has sunk.

Back then, we had a conservative president and a liberal Speaker of the House who saw politics from different perspectives yet actually enjoyed sharing a laugh and a libation.

Have things changed or what?

But something that hasn't changed is the care and professionalism and dedication with which letter carriers do their jobs—and the resulting respect in which the public holds you. Or, what the Postal Service means to this country. Those, fortunately, are truths that remain constant.

If we recently escaped the destruction that rightwing lawmakers—and, truth be told, some moderate ones, from both parties—would do to us, it is no small measure because of what each of you represents in your community. The competence with which you carry out your contractual duties is complemented by the bravery that characterizes your actions when need arises.

I read about the Indiana carrier, George Tadros (an Air Force and Army veteran still delivering the mail), and I thought of today's counterpart, Indiana carrier Terri Reeves, whose efforts to replace a leaking roof for a family grieving over the loss of their soldier son in Afghanistan brought the best out of hundreds of residents while bringing a community closer together.

One thing that has changed, unfortunately, is the advent of radical, uncompromising lawmakers in the nation's capital intent on attacking the public sector. And so, beyond doing our jobs and performing acts of heroism on the route when need arises, we now have a third mission: To get the truth out about the value of the Postal Service and the source of its financial problems.

This mission may be new, but your willingness to step up, and the effectiveness with which you are doing so, spring from the same attributes that long have stood letter carriers in good stead with the American public.

Vince Sombrotto, whom we honor this month, was indeed a statesman. And as Fred Rolando meets today's tough challenges—with the help of so many of you—he is proving to be no less of one. In his consistent, steady and credible manner he is telling our story to communities large and small throughout this country—influencing the public and political discussion perhaps more than any other U.S. labor leader.

As President Rolando was being quoted prominently in national stories discussing the Postal Service's positive financial results for Fiscal Year 2013 and in others about the Amazon-USPS Sunday package delivery deal or the congressional budget talks, his efforts were being complemented by explanations of pre-funding in regional newspapers or on local TV by state presidents John Triplett of Indiana, John Paige of Idaho, Bob McNulty of Kentucky, by Iowa letter carrier Mark Fallis—and by many others at all levels of the NALC.

What letter carriers were a quarter-century ago, or, indeed, two centuries ago, you remain today: the glue that binds this vast nation together even as you serve, protect and uplift the countless individual neighborhoods that make it up.

The more things change...

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The Postal Record (ISSN 0032-5376) is published monthly by the National Association of Letter Carriers. Periodicals postage paid at Washington, DC, and at additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, NALC, 100 Indiana Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20001-2144.

Subscription included in membership dues. First-class subscription available for \$20 per year (contact Membership Department).

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Circulation: 287,000. Union-printed using soy-based inks.

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