

# Musings



**Philip  
Dine**

**S**o, eight years here at NALC, five biennial national conventions. Not a huge chunk of time, but not insignificant. More importantly, I've watched as you have weighed in on postal issues thousands of times—coiently, factually, persuasively—through letters to the editor, op-ed pieces, appearances on radio or TV, quotes in news stories. In so doing, you've informed the public, influenced politicians and educated journalists; all of it, of course, combining to profoundly change the national conversation.

But what, I was thinking the other day, led me here? Nothing obvious, it seemed, and this was never a plan. But when I forced myself to

focus on that question, a different picture emerged.

**Growing up, I was drawn to two pursuits—sports and politics.** Beyond playing sports and following politics, I wanted to communicate with those who practiced these activities at the highest levels. And so, I wrote to people I admired or simply was curious about—asking questions, seeking guidance or voicing support.

I sent letters nonstop, counting on the post office to deliver them even when I was unsure of the exact address, racing home to our mailbox every day after school to see what awaited me. Often I was rewarded for the expense of my 3- or 4-cent stamp, finding letters from the likes of Jack Kennedy and Herbert Hoover, Indira Gandhi and Yugoslavia's Tito, Nelson Rockefeller and Bobby Kennedy, Jacob Javits and Adlai Stevenson (one extra point if the first rings a bell; two for the second), Wilt and the Big 'O,' Jerry West and Bill Bradley (who advised me on where I could study in Europe while remaining active in basketball), Sandy Koufax and Don Drysdale, Bob Pettit and Red Auerbach, Casey Stengel and Roberto Clemente, Bobby Hull and Gordie Howe, Willis Reed and Earl the Pearl, Joe DiMaggio and Hank Aaron, J. Edgar Hoover and Walter Cronkite.

All of these, and many more, brought to our home by our reliable letter carrier. (I formed such a high opinion of his craft that when, many years later, I wrote a 2003 commentary piece for the *Washington Post*—arguing that Michael Jordan was a great player but didn't deserve being idolized because lots of other workers also give it their all, for far less notoriety—I highlighted letter carriers.)

**After studying labor relations, I reported on unions for a quarter-century in St. Louis, Washington, DC, and elsewhere, early on speaking frequently with a certain Vin-**

cent Sombrotto to gain insight into—and get story ideas about—the labor movement. He was not only a font of wisdom but also was willing to spend time talking to a young reporter whose curiosity far exceeded his knowledge. I was able to interview him in person when he traveled to St. Louis, and I covered the 58th NALC convention in St. Louis in 1992. (Hey, maybe that counts as six conventions I've been to. And maybe I knew Vince before lots of other folks did.)

Following 9/11, my newspaper beat expanded to include the military, which turns out to be another reason I feel at home here. Not only is the Postal Service the country's largest employer of military veterans, not only are so many of the letter carriers I deal with wearing their second uniform, more broadly the same ethic of service, duty and commitment to helping and protecting others that I grew to admire in the troops is evident throughout the letter carrier ranks.

Seeing where journalism was headed, I decided to try something else, so I wrote a book about the decline of labor and how unions could do a better job of dealing with the media to communicate their continuing relevance not only for workers but for our entire country. That took me to the other side of the notepad or microphone, doing hundreds of print, TV and radio interviews on these matters and addressing union conventions around the country, from firefighters to teachers, laborers to government employees, bricklayers to aerospace workers.

When I figured I should try to get a full-time job, I called the staffer Vince had brought with him to St. Louis a couple of decades earlier, and he advised me of a possible opening here—helping letter carriers get out their message, dealing with journalists, editing the magazine. Hmmm, I thought.

Writing this, it all seems so natural.

**It's an honor working with and for you on such a noble cause.** It's rewarding to help you influence the public, the press and the pols. And it's as much fun as racing home to my mailbox.

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