

Our history



Philip Dine

One lawmaker I reported on closely was a Blue Dog Democrat from rural Missouri named Ike Skelton. His family had a long record of military service, and though childhood polio prevented him from serving, he was seen by members of both parties as *the* congressional expert on all things military.

Ike, who rose to chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, periodically compiled a reading list of 50 or more books on the military, and it was regarded as required reading by politicians from four-star generals to Pentagon officials. It included ancient writings, such as those of Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu from 2,500 years ago.

Knowledge of history was, in Ike's eyes, indispensable for a leader.

When he was a young county prosecutor, his mentor was fellow Missourian Harry S Truman (yes, the lack of a period after 'S' is correct; it stood for nothing). What set Truman apart, Skelton told me, "was his understanding of history, which was the key to his wisdom. He could see around the corner....And consequently, his decisions were good."

Well, this *Postal Record* issue brims with history—history relevant to each of us, as NALC marks the 50th anniversary of the Great Postal strike of March 1970. It will, we hope, bring back vivid recollections for those who participated; inform the rest of us about the events; explain how those brave actions brought us rights, respect, benefits and security; inspire us to carry on this legacy in our own ways; and offer ideas about the strike's impact on the broader labor movement.

Asked about the strike, Thomas Kochan, MIT professor of industrial relations and former consultant to the U.S. secretary of labor, focused on an intriguing aspect—the role of the labor secretary at the time, in contrast with the air traffic controllers' strike 11 years later.

"I distinctly remember in that 1970 strike that you had a secretary of labor named George Shultz. He's the one who went to [President Richard] Nixon and said, 'This is a national disaster for us. We've got to get this done.' Nixon said, 'Well, go do it.' Shultz went on to mediate."

Shultz, a World War II Marine veteran, would become only the second American to serve in four cabinet posts, including secretary of state.

The importance attached to the labor secretary's position back then mattered, Kochan said. "I think that's a tribute to a really effective secretary of labor, one who has the ear of the president, and one who can moderate the political instincts of whoever's in the White House."

This led a Republican administration, following a disruptive strike, "to say we're going to put something in place that avoids it in the future, with some respect for collective bargaining and the rights of workers to join a union."

"You didn't have that in 1981."

Indeed, when President Ronald Reagan fired the air traffic controllers, sending labor into a downspin, his anti-union labor secretary had a quite different historical distinction—he later resigned as the first cabinet officer in history to be indicted while in office.

Another academic has a unique perspective; Lowell Turner was a 22-year-old collections driver in San Francisco, two weeks on the job. "I showed up at work," he said. "The guys were standing around in front of the garage, talking about whether we should clock in or join the picket line. A couple of bosses started yelling at us, 'Hey, it's time for work.'"

"Someone said, 'Let's strike!' Someone else said 'Wait, what are the issues?' A short guy with a New York accent said, 'There's only one issue—are we going to support our brothers in New York or not?' That really connected us with the national solidarity of the strike," Turner said. "When the guys decided we're going to strike, I said 'Right on.' I was out there on the picket line. It was a really formative experience for me."

"For me, it's been a lifelong inspiration."

Turner later was shop steward and chief steward, turned his branch's newsletter into an award-winner, went to night school to study the labor movement he served during the day, earned a Ph.D. and spent three decades educating Cornell University students about labor.

"I owe my career to [the strike]," he says.

Asked whether the postal strike inspired today's bold actions by teachers and other public employees, Gene Carroll of Cornell's Worker Institute, responded: "When history is known, it has significance. If it's not known, it doesn't have significance. I think that's the essence of why labor history is important."

In other words, keeping the strike's memory—and lessons—alive is critical, not only for us but for labor writ large.

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