

FVR: Message, media and members



**Philip
Dine**

There is much one could say about what NALC President Fredric V. Rolando brings to the table: from expertise in all matters postal to an unwavering focus on the mission and never on personal recognition, from a leadership style that inspires those around him to do their best to an ability to simultaneously consider both the granular and the big picture. All that has led to an array of triumphs as he faced—and faced down—daunting challenges during his tenure, which ends this month.

I certainly have my stories on those counts. But I learned in my time as a journalist to focus on what you know best.

What I know best about Fred Rolando

is how his various traits coalesced to help NALC—on his watch and under his direction—save the United States Postal Service, a national treasure based in the Constitution.

When he assumed our union’s presidency 13 years ago, the USPS was hurtling toward financial ruin as the result of the absurd—and unique—congressional mandate that it pre-fund future retiree health benefits, a ticket to oblivion for an agency that gets its resources not from taxpayers but rather by selling stamps.

The odds against our remedying this were high, for two reasons.

First, the clout of those aggressively using this artificial crisis to denigrate, degrade and downsize the Postal Service—numerous lawmakers, administrations of both political parties, privatization advocates, even some postmasters general tasked with shepherding the USPS. Second, the misleading conventional “wisdom” that reinforced their efforts, bolstered by news outlets that, sometimes intentionally but often through astonishingly superficial coverage, misled the public. The Postal Service, the story went, was losing money hand over fist because it was rendered obsolete by technological progress; taxpayers couldn’t afford to fund it, especially given the Great Recession; so postal services needed to be cut back, if not cut entirely.

President Rolando, whose analytical bent gets him directly to the core of an issue, knew that rebutting the false narrative that served as the anti-postal rationale was key.

Despite not craving the limelight, he embarked on a media offensive. An early venture gave me initial pause. Arriving at the CNN news desk for his live interview, tension tangible, I said with the utmost earnestness, “Hello, this is Fredric Rolando, president of the National Association of Letter Carriers”; whereupon he quickly inquired, “Where do you keep the candy?”

Moments later, before a national audience, he knocked it out of the park, driving home his points in concise and compelling fashion. He proceeded to do so week after week in radio, TV or print interviews, whatever the reporters’ angles or attitudes. I soon realized that the way he related to those skeptical, often dour, folks known as journalists was part and parcel of his effectiveness—especially when he followed a light-hearted remark with his razor-sharp grasp of the facts and his messaging discipline. I also realized he was educating journalists every bit as much as their audiences, which would help us moving forward.

Equally important, he unleashed NALC’s rank-and-file letter carriers, activists and local leaders to change the national conversation—a daring move in a labor movement that too often tightly controls communications from the top. Given the obstacles NALC faced, Fred Rolando knew intuitively that we had no choice. But there was more to it. He doesn’t just say that our strength derives from our members. He believes it. And, in our hour of peril, he put that belief into practice.

These twin actions, by altering public opinion and thus influencing legislators to address flawed public policy, helped produce this year’s landmark postal reform.

Over the years, at key intervals, something else played a role: wisdom and perspective. It wasn’t just what he said, but how he said it and when he said it. The message he expressed, the example he set, was calm and devoid of invective. His tone was constructive, not accusatory; understated, not shrill. He explained, he never merely asserted. And he weighed in only when strategy dictated.

That approach lent credibility and impact to his words.

Three years ago this month, I asked a top postal reporter why he frequently included Fred’s comments in his stories. He cited the reflective nature of those comments.

“I definitely do think that hearing from President Rolando always provides valuable context,” he replied, adding that this gave readers a “broader understanding” of postal issues.

Fred Rolando has proven to be an indispensable leader for a demanding period in our nation’s history. The 290,000 letter carriers NALC represents, the Postal Service and the hundreds of millions of Americans who rely on the mail are better off for his service.

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