

# The Bakersfield Californian

## Does Congress really want to cut spending? Not if its rebuke of US Postal Service is any indication

By: Robert Price – April 13, 2013

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How addicted to spending is Congress? So addicted it'll actually force a government agency to squander \$2 billion a year that the agency would very much like to save.

I refer to the U.S. Postal Service's plan, announced in February, to halt Saturday deliveries. Cutting back from six days a week to five would save the USPS a cool \$2 billion annually. But Congress blocked the move by passing a temporary federal spending bill that locked in the funding, and the Government Accountability Office ruled that the Postal Service would have to accept it because it didn't have the authority to change the terms of its mission.

Turns out that despite all its out-of-control-spending bravado, Congress is not merely disinclined to cut excess, it is in some cases legally barred from doing so. So take your money, postmaster, and shut up.

Yes, the Postal Service must spend every dime that has been budgeted. Even though it lost \$15.9 billion last year and \$5.1 billion in 2011. Even though email and other online communications have almost completely taken over. People under the age of 40 can barely remember which corner of the envelope gets the stamp, but their tax dollars will continue to subsidize the diminishing few who do.

With this Saturday delivery cutback, Congress had a chance to do something meaningfully symbolic. By agreeing to scale back the size and scale of government, even modestly in this case, lawmakers would be fulfilling a promise that dozens of the current batch in Congress made to voters. Instead, they defaulted to the old "protect my constituents" posture.

Virginia Democratic Rep. Gerry Connolly, among those who opposed the USPS plan, declared he was happy to see that "the postmaster general (had been directed) to cease his misguided efforts to blatantly disregard the will of Congress and the rule of law itself." Or, put more plainly, the postmaster general has been thwarted in his efforts to balance the agency's books and keep it relevant in a market dominated by UPS, FedEx and their for-profit brethren.

It's not like Americans would miss one day's worth of junk mail. Anyone who actually yearns for that stuff can just wade through their email spam.

The USPS board of governors, which senses the way the wind is blowing, will keep trying to encourage Congress to pass legislation "that provides the Postal Service with the authority to implement a financially appropriate and responsible delivery schedule."

The USPS has done just about everything else it can do. It disposed of 43 properties in 2011 and 49 in 2012, generating \$228 million last year from the rental and sale of assorted facilities. Of course that's a drop in the bucket compared to what it might save by simply skipping Saturdays.

If the Republican-controlled Congress were really interested in slashing the federal budget, it would take its cuts wherever and whenever it could get them. It doesn't.

Here's one small case in point: the Harry S. Truman Scholarship Program, an education assistance fund with an endowment so huge it needs no federal support. No president since 1978 has asked for government funding. Congress gives it \$1 million a year anyway.

Military spending is rich with examples. The Pentagon began trying to kill off the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, widely regarded as a failure, in 2006, but Congress continued to fund it every year. Only in 2012 was the lemon finally put out of its misery. Neither did the Pentagon have any interest in spending \$450 million on an engine for the Joint Strike Fighter. Both the Obama and Bush administrations tried to ax it from budget after budget, but Congress kept it alive until 2012.

Last week, Congress finally received an overdue budget proposal from the president. Barack Obama wants to eliminate or trim various programs to the tune of about \$20 billion. Sure, that's borderline insignificant considering the federal government will spend \$3.77 trillion in the next fiscal year, but it's something.

"The sad part," Tad DeHaven of the conservative Cato Institute told The Washington Times, "is that Congress won't even agree to a lot of the president's proposed cuts." Obama may indeed be a spendthrift president, as is the common perception, but Congress is a more-than-capable accomplice.

Irritated? Write your congressman. If you're not sure how to seal an envelope, try email instead. I understand Congress is equipped to deal with that form of communication, too.