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The US Postal Service lifted my family out of poverty. We can't let it die

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When I was a little boy, I desperately wanted my grandfather to take me and my brother on his rounds as a mail carrier in rural North Carolina. Each morning, my “Papa” would get up and eat breakfast before dawn, fill a red and black plaid Aladdin thermos with coffee, and drive his old gray DJ-5 Jeep into town to collect bulging sacks of mail.

We visited my grandparents on summer vacation and at Christmas and I remember one icy cold December morning when Papa left his thermos on the kitchen counter. He came back by the house and I remember running out to the driveway to peer in the Jeep’s windows at the stacks of parcels and bundles of letters piled up so high they brushed the ceiling.

“It’s Santa’s other sled,” Papa quipped as he settled himself behind the steering wheel, which was on the right side like a British car. Hundreds of rubber bands of all colors and sizes dangled from the gear shift. “And it’s all gotta go where it’s all gotta go.”

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For 35 years, Papa delivered to the far-flung farms and homesteads there in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. That old Jeep bumped over frozen ruts in muddy winter roads, braved the smothering heat of summer, and faithfully carried letters, parcels, medications and other essentials to hundreds of households and farms that existed out beyond the municipal fringes. Some homes on his route were little more than shacks with neither electricity nor plumbing, the mail being their only connection to modernity.

Papa wouldn’t take us with him when there was mail in the truck because, he said, “The mail is private. Someone could be getting letters from a bill collector or receiving legal papers that are none of your business.”

That seemed ridiculous to my seven-year-old self. What did I care about bill collectors? But to Papa, the integrity of the mail and its safe delivery were a sacred trust. He was a devout believer in the US Postal Service creed: “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.”

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The postal service hired my grandfather when he returned from fighting in Europe during the second world war. He was the son of a farmer with little education beyond the ninth grade. He

grew up in grinding poverty during the Great Depression, but his job carrying the mail allowed him to ascend into the US's then-burgeoning middle class, to save money for my mother's college education, and to escape the legacy of poverty that had dogged his family for generations.

In addition to providing a vital pipeline for rural Americans to receive essential goods and services, the USPS is also one of the largest US employers of black workers, who make up 21% of the postal service's workforce. With a median salary of \$55,000, working for the USPS is that rarest of things in modern America, a stable job that pays a living wage.

Republicans in the federal government have been trying to eliminate the post office by financially hobbling the agency while simultaneously denying it the means to evolve into a profitable 21st-century operation. Rightwing organizations such as the Cato Institute insist that the USPS can only survive through privatization, a move that would fly in the face of the explicit wishes of America's founding fathers, who enshrined the postal service in our nation's constitution.

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For me, the fight to save the US Postal Service is personal, not only because it may be the only way to safely vote this November, but also because I remember my grandfather's dedication and the joy he took in his work. Being a mail carrier gave him the pride of serving a vital role in his community, the dignity of an honest living, and an opportunity to shift our family's fortunes away from poverty and struggle.

- David Ferguson is a writer

Americans have had enough ...

... and are marching for justice in unprecedented numbers. In small towns and big cities across the country, thousands of people are giving voice to the grief and anger that generations of black Americans have suffered at the hands of the criminal justice system. Young and old, black and white, family and friends have joined together to say: enough.

The unconscionable examples of racism over the last weeks and months come as America's communities of color have been hit hardest by the coronavirus and catastrophic job losses. This is a perfect storm hitting black Americans. Meanwhile, the political leadership suggests that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts". The president who promised to end the "American carnage" is in danger of making it worse.

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