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Presidential Commissions and the Concept of "Reality"
A Supplementary Statement to the Commission on the U.S. Postal Service

Presidential commissions are usually established when the normative political process fails to deal with a significant public issue. That has certainly been the case with respect to postal reform. Commissions are expected to set aside their political biases and personal preferences and examine the evidence for or against change with scrupulous objectivity. Members' reputations and the fact that they have no stake in the outcome lends credibility, the gold standard in searching for the optimum approach in resolving complex social/political conundrums.

Unlike presidential or congressional candidates, they are not seeking reelection or campaign funds. They are not restrained by existing law; in fact, it is often their duty to recommend statutory changes. Nor are commissioners concerned with maintaining good relations with the federal work force or with the interest groups that may be affected by their recommendations. They are not there to represent or protect any of these groups. Their polestar, their organizing principle, should be the public interest, no more and no less.

Notwithstanding their total independence, however, some commissions see their roles as being "realistic" evaluators of what is politically attainable. I suggest that this view of "realism" misconceives and distorts a commission's unique and powerful role. It is not hard to understand why result-oriented men and women want their recommendations acted upon. "Why should we waste our time proposing changes which will be dead on arrival?" I will try to answer this question later.

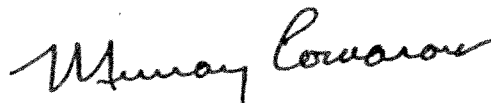
I have long advocated such a commission, and I applauded its creation, although my testimony before the commission expressed concern (and some mystification) about its limited staff resources and its July 31 deadline. I now have an additional concern. Based upon hearings and conversations with individual commissioners, some observers predict that the commission may not tackle some basic issues, such as eliminating wage arbitration, on the theory that serious structural changes will not be enacted. If that turns out to be the case, it will be a sad day for stakeholders and for the public.

This "realistic" approach would echo long-standing minimalist tactics of the Postal Service and most mailers. One can find some justification for such timidity. Postal officials and big mailers say, "Suppose I came out in favor of abolishing arbitration and the Postal Rate Commission. I still need to work with the unions and the PRC." (Postmaster General Jack Potter, however, astonished

the postal community recently by proposing that the Board of Governors set rates.) Or they say, "Of course governors should have experience in large companies or similar bodies but I'm not about to antagonize the Board." Or, "Nonprofits are too strong to tangle with."

A commission has no such barriers. It should set aside political "reality" for several reasons. First, it's not their job to make political judgments. Second, they may be wrong. I was involved in two efforts which culminated in the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970 and the creation of the Environmental Protection Administration. In both cases, the punditocracy said there was no chance of success. Some of my friends, wise and seasoned in the ways of Washington, ridiculed me and the two commissions I served for our quixotic quest to beat the unbeatable foes--Congress and the interest groups. They ate crow.

Even assuming that bold recommendations for basic reform are not likely to be enacted in the short term, there is value in placing such issues on the public agenda. They would attract supporters and opponents and begin a spirited debate. That's good in a democracy. Comptroller General David M. Walker recently gave the postal commission a specific set of comments, including his view that fundamental changes are needed to the Postal Service's business model, its regulatory and legislative underpinning, and its governance. He is dead on.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Murray Cowarou". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.