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POSTAL MONOPOLY

There is a new slogan sprouting on automobile bumpers that says: "If you like the Postal Service, you'll love nationalized oil." It is a measure of public disaffection with ever slower and ever more costly mail delivery that it has become a popularly-accepted criterion of Government inefficiency.

With the Postal Service threatening to cut its service to three mail deliveries a week, it may be hard for those under age 30 to believe that one of Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 campaign promises was to restore the second daily mail delivery that had been eliminated by the Truman Administration. We used to have eleven home mail deliveries per week, we are now down to six, and we are threatened with dire forecasts of a further reduction.

Thomas Jefferson once predicted that the post office would be "a source of eternal scramble among the members [of Congress] to see who can get the most money wasted in their states." He was right, of course; but the Post Office under the spoils system was economical compared with the deficits that have piled up since 1970 when the Post Office was taken out of politics and turned into a government corporation. This was supposed to inject "business efficiency" into mail delivery, but it turned out to be the same kind of "business efficiency" made famous by the W. T. Grant Company and Penn Central.

Since 1971, the number of pieces of mail carried by the Postal Service has increased only two percent (from $87 to $89 billion), but the annual postal deficit has increased 385 percent (from $204 to $989 million). The Consumer Price Index has risen 35 percent, but first class postal rates have risen 63 percent.

This deficit has been galloping upwards despite the fact that the

Postal Service enjoys a legal monopoly enforced by the pettiest kind of harassment such as the prohibition against any individual's hand-delivering a letter or circular in someone else's mailbox in your own neighborhood.

To enforce its monopoly, back in 1916 the Post Office declared that the corridors of an office building can be designated as post routes, thereby making private delivery of letters illegal. The Post Office has defined "letter" to include computer cards, bills, receipts, price lists, and other business documents.

The U.S. Constitution permits a postal monopoly, but does not mandate it. The Articles of Confederation conferred on Congress "the sole and exclusive right (of) establishing and regulating post offices, but the Founding Fathers made a deliberate decision against such an explicit delegation of monopoly power when they wrote the U.S. Constitution. The constitutional words adopted were merely: The Congress shall have power … to establish post offices and post roads." It is obvious that there is nothing sacred or inviolable about a Federal monopoly of postal service.

There isn't anything so difficult or special about delivering letters. It doesn't pose nearly as many problems as delivering quarts of perishable fresh milk or gallons of inflammable gasoline. Private carriers of packages are able to give good service and make a profit. When Government fails, it is a good time to try private enterprise.