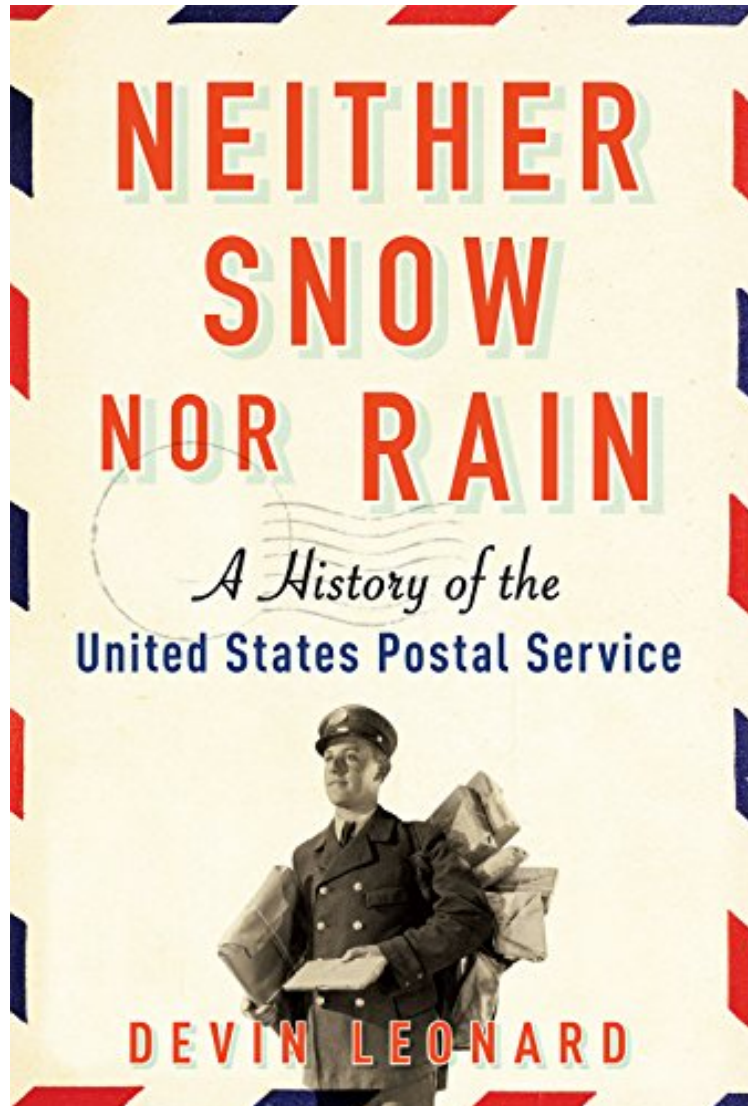


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# Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service

*Devin Leonard*

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**Devin Leonard : Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Neither Snow nor Rain: A History of the United States Postal Service:

23 of 23 people found the following review helpful. The ups and downs of an essential American institution  
By Ashutosh S. Jogalekar  
The other day when I went to the post office to mail a package, I had little idea what kind of a tradition I was being a part of. Devin Leonard's book sheds light on this tradition. His book is an account of an essential American institution, one that also happens to be one of the largest, oldest and most efficient organizations in

the world. Some of the statistics pertaining to the USPS are amazing: for instance it delivers more items in a week than FedEx does in a year, and every week 300,000 postal workers deliver 500 million pieces of mail around the nation. Essentially the USPS is responsible for 40 percent of the world's mail. Even with the advent of UPS, FedEx and the Internet, the post office is still a ubiquitous institution. The volume traces the history of the USPS through its founding by Benjamin Franklin who was the first postmaster general. During key historical events like the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, the post office served to rally the sensibilities of civic-minded citizens through the delivery of 'incendiary' material like abolitionist literature. Leonard talks about the growth of the post office across the emerging westward frontier in the 19th century, competition from private couriers (like Henry Wells who ultimately set up Well Fargo bank) which started as early as in the 1830s and the short-lived Pony Express which delivered mail from Missouri to California using a horse relay. Early postmen had to fight off Indian attacks and had to navigate harsh geographical territory to deliver mail. There are amusing and interesting tidbits here: for instance, 'mailing' children reached alarming proportions before it was declared illegal. People also routinely tested the system by mailing fragile articles like eggs and fish. The book also does a good job laying out the social consequences of USPS policies. For instance rural free delivery which was started under Teddy Roosevelt's administration made it possible for farmers to know prices and the weather and freed them from rapacious customers and failed crops. The book also reveals a sometimes fascinating cast of characters. Among all government positions, the position of postmaster general is probably least known, but Leonard tells us how pioneering postmasters like John Wanamaker and James Farley (under the stamp-loving FDR) expanded the mandate of the post office, commissioned vivid murals and built post offices in far flung locations. A particularly entertaining character is Anthony Comstock who took it upon himself to stem the flow of prurient literature through the mail, and remarkably sought and acquired powers to arrest those guilty of this crime. In fact, efforts to stop pornographic material from making its way through the mail have always been periodic features of the evolution of the USPS, usually engendered by puritanical postmasters. One of the most readable parts of the book explores how intrepid (some would say foolhardy) pilots braved bad weather and primitive aircraft to prove that they could deliver mail faster than the railroad; some as early as only ten years after the Wright brothers's first flight. It's also interesting to note how the birth of the US Air Force can partially be traced to recognition of the poor quality of America's pilots and airplanes by way of airmail disasters. Unfortunately I thought the book got bogged down in too much detail in its latter half, even as it explored topics like competition by private mail delivery agents, the minutiae of legislative dealings between the USPS, unions and Congress, the great postal strike of 1970 which virtually brought the economy to a halt (attesting to the importance of the service) and occasional shootings by disgruntled postal employees that tarnished the image of the USPS. What would have sustained the interesting momentum in my opinion is stories of individual postmen and women, their triumphs and troubles and their dedication: one promising lead appears when the book talks about New York postmen stoically delivering mail even on 9/11, doing their duty and conveying a reassuring sense of continuity to a shell-shocked public. More such personal stories would have really enlivened the narrative. In addition I think there was a real opportunity to discuss more the logistics of the post office, all the myriad ways in which it deals with the stupendous amount of mail it receives every day. The book ends by noting that the only way the USPS has survived is by making pacts which would have been unthinkable a few decades ago: for instance it tells us that 40% of items are now carried by USPS, and most of its business now comes from junk mail. Budget cuts and losses continue to challenge its existence. But one thing the book makes clear is that whether it thrives or not, the USPS has been an integral part of the life of this country since its very beginnings. That's something worth thinking about the next time you step foot into your neighboring post office.

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people found the following review helpful. Entertaining, illuminating, and a sad commentary on American politics  
By Mal Warwick  
For a guy who made his living for more than thirty years by writing letters and mailing hundreds of millions of copies of them, you might think I'd be familiar with the story of the US Postal Service. Unaccountably, I knew little before I read journalist Devin Leonard's compact and engaging new popular history, *Neither Snow Nor Rain*. In Leonard's account to learn just how significant the agency has been in building the American nation—and how much it has evolved since the days of our first postmaster general, Benjamin Franklin. The staggering scope of the US post office Leonard makes clear at the outset that the postal service remains one of the world's largest business enterprises, the rise of UPS, FedEx, and email notwithstanding. "Six days a week, its 300,000 letter carriers deliver 513 million pieces of mail, more than 40 percent of the world's volume. . . [T]he USPS delivers more items in nine days than UPS does in a year. It transports more in seven days than FedEx brings to its customers in a year." Leonard traces the history of this gargantuan institution from its beginnings in the late eighteenth century through the development of railroads, the telegraph, the telephone, the automobile, the airplane, and the Internet—every one of which substantially impacted the fortunes of the USPS. He introduces each one of these technological innovations, and every expansion of postal service, with an anecdote. The result is an eminently readable book. The story of the agency's attempts to inaugurate air mail is especially entertaining. "The great link between minds" In the early years of the Republic, communications were spotty and almost always time-consuming. It could take weeks for a letter or a newspaper to travel from a city in the North to one in the South, or from a city in the East to one in the ever-widening West. Despite the cost, the US

Postal Service undertook the challenge to reach every corner of the nation. Alexis de Tocqueville described the service in the 1820s as “the great link between minds. . . I do not think that so much intellectual activity exists in the most enlightened and populous district in France.” Leonard makes clear what in hindsight seems patently obvious: what was characterized as an “American character” could have emerged only through the linkages established by the postal system. Fighting tooth and nail to modernize America’s cantankerous brand of democratic politics has not served the postal system very kindly. Worldwide, despite its enormous size, the USPS stands out as an antiquated institution limited to delivering physical items, mostly letters, by hand. In other industrialized countries, the postal system is involved in a far wider range of activities that make it possible, in some cases, to become extremely profitable. Take, for example, Posti, the Finnish postal system, which (according to Wikipedia) consists of the four following divisions: Postal Services handles the delivery of letters, direct mail, and newspapers and magazines in Finland through its subsidiary Posti Oy. Parcel and Logistics Services offers comprehensive supply chain solutions, parcel and e-commerce services, transport services, international road, air, sea and rail freight services, warehousing or supplementary services and customs clearance services. The company provides global services through its partners. Itella Russia provides logistics services in Russia. OpusCapita provides financial process automation. OpusCapita has operations in eight European countries (Estonia, Finland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland and Sweden) and a network of international partners covering the globe. Posti may be an extreme example. However, it is a public limited company in some ways similar to the US Postal Service. The difference is that the operations of the USPS are constantly prey to intervention by Congress and vulnerable to massive lobbying efforts by private industry. (The pressure brought to bear by the direct marketing industry to keep bulk postal rates below USPS costs is one egregious example.) Congress has never been willing to grant full autonomy to the postal service. As a result, politics has almost invariably frustrated the frequent efforts over the years to modernize the USPS, largely because that would open up competition for private companies. The upshot is well known: in recent decades, the postal service has perennially operated at a deficit. About the author Devin Leonard is a business journalist who has worked for Bloomberg BusinessWeek, Fortune, and The New York Observer. His articles have also appeared in The New York Times, Wired, and many other publications. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A First-Class History Lesson By Kindle Customer This book is nothing short of fantastic! Author Leonard has a well-documented and extremely well-written effort here. Jammed with fascinating facts and historical accounts of the USPS early days. He then traces the evolution of the Post Office Department through the early and mid-1800s, the Civil War and the establishment of home delivery, the rationale behind the creation of money orders, the foresight and derring-do of various postmasters general, the determination and firm resolve to bring air mail service to America, rural free delivery and its pros and cons; in short, a cannot-put-down read of the growth of a nation and a postal service that kept pace with that growth. This book would be a superb gift for the American history or trivia buff or someone with even the merest interest in postal workings. You cannot go wrong with this one. Highly enjoyable reading; no dry, dull, boring stuff here. The USPS comes alive. Read. Enjoy. And learn a fact or two of a vital, most integral part of our country's history.

The United States Postal Service is a wondrous American creation. Seven days a week, its army of 300,000 letter carriers delivers 513 million pieces of mail, forty percent of the world’s volume. It is far more efficient than any other mail service—more than twice as efficient as the Japanese and easily outpacing the Germans and British. And the USPS has a storied history. Founded by Benjamin Franklin, it was the information network that bound far-flung Americans together, fostered a common culture, and helped American business to prosper. A first class stamp remains one of the greatest bargains of all time, and yet, the USPS is slowly vanishing. Critics say it is slow and archaic. Mail volume is down. The workforce is shrinking. Post offices are closing. In *Neither Snow Nor Rain*, journalist Devin Leonard tackles the fascinating, centuries-long history of the USPS, from the first letter carriers through Franklin’s days, when postmasters worked out of their homes and post roads cut new paths through the wilderness. Under Andrew Jackson, the post office was molded into a vast patronage machine, and by the 1870s, over seventy percent of federal employees were postal workers. As the country boomed, USPS aggressively developed new technology, from mobile post offices on railroads and air mail service to mechanical sorting machines and optical character readers. *Neither Snow Nor Rain* is a rich, multifaceted history, full of remarkable characters, from the stamp-collecting FDR, to the revolutionaries who challenged USPS’s monopoly on mail, to the renegade union members who brought the system—and the country—to a halt in the 1970s. An exciting and engrossing read, *Neither Snow Nor Rain* is the first major history of the USPS in over fifty years.

Praise for *Neither Snow nor Rain*: Named a Favorite Book of 2016 by the Washington Independent of Books “Delectably readable . . . [Leonard] has a zesty prose style, a great sense of humor, a fine eye for the telling anecdote and a lucid way of unraveling some of the controversies and challenges our postal service has faced in its 224 years of existence. Leonard’s account offers surprises on almost every other page . . . [and] delivers both the triumphs and travails with clarity, wit and heart.”—Chicago Tribune “[A] sweeping and entertaining history . . .

offers a host of interesting anecdotes.”—New York Times Book “Intensely readable . . . Colored by entertaining and lively retellings, including the exploits of the Pony Express and of Wells Fargo . . . Leonard mines important moments from the history of the postal service.”—Nation “Engaging [and] well-written.”—Washington Post “Neither Snow nor Rain . . . serves up a colorful array of visionaries, hucksters, daredevils and crackpots . . . What’s most remarkable is the way [the] book makes you care what happens to its main protagonist, the U.S. Postal Service itself. And, as such, it leaves you at the end in suspense.”—USA Today “A lively examination of America’s most ubiquitous public institution . . . Captivating and thoughtful.”—Washington Independent of Books “Answers every question you’ve ever had about the United States Postal Service . . . Surprises abound. Who knew, for instance, that some early-20th-century families sent their children by parcel post to save on train fares?”—Week “A good, quirky history book . . . Lively, fun . . . Leonard delivers a lot here, and moves fast as he entertains . . . Remember how exciting it was to get birthday cards in the mail? Neither Snow nor Rain is that much fun, and I think you’ll enjoy it. If you’re stamping around for something different to read, you’ll love every letter.”—Journal Record “Equally rollicking and relevant . . . this is history on an epic scale . . . Engaging and concise . . . Leonard writes with a hard-nosed understanding of the organization’s current problems, but also sympathy and a fair amount of hope.”—Strategy Business “[A] delightful surprise . . . Devin Leonard’s book is a treasure; one of the best non-fiction books I’ve ever read. [Leonard] brings history to life, fleshes out bureaucrats and makes us deeply care about the post office . . . Magnificent . . . [A] definitive book . . . Whether you read this by swiping or turning, just read it.”—Newark Star Ledger “Surprisingly fascinating.”—Gist “Leonard doesn’t shrink from discussing the issues facing one of the nation’s oldest services. He tosses in a fair amount of postal lore, and one doesn’t have to be a history buff or a stamp collector to appreciate his tales . . . A compelling [story] worth reading.”—Deseret News “Lively . . . brisk [and] informative . . . A spirited look at the business and impact of delivering mail.”—Kirkus “An engrossing account of a once-vital service that may soon be nothing more than a memory.”—Mental Floss (25 Amazing New Books for Spring) “Devin Leonard’s marvelous history of the United States Post Office recounts the American experience from a singular and highly entertaining angle. Along the way, you’ll encounter a visionary founding father, glad-handing rogue politicians, terrified biplane pilots, firebrand union bosses, and children with postage attached to their overcoats mailed cross-country as parcel post. I dare you to put it down.”—William J. Bernstein, author of *A Splendid Exchange* and *Masters of the Word* “Devin Leonard has achieved something astonishing. He has taken the Post Office—too often disparaged as the carrier of ‘snail mail’; in this age of instant communication—and delivered a vivid and surprising story filled with indelibly drawn personalities including a founding father, an obsessive nineteenth-century smut-hunter, the swashbuckling pilots of the earliest, nearly suicidal airmail service, and many others. With crisp prose and unflagging narrative drive, Leonard reveals the forgotten history of the institution, and makes abundantly clear, the story of the Post Office is also the story of America.”—Fergus M. Bordewich, author of *The First Congress: How James Madison, George Washington, and a Group of Extraordinary Men Invented the Government* “Devin Leonard has given us a fast-moving, richly detailed portrait of the U.S. Postal Service—a system far more important to the country than is generally understood. Any devout fans of Cliff Clavin will be both proud and horrified by what Leonard unearths, but ultimately readers will be cautiously optimistic about this institution’s future.”—Brad Stone, author of *The Everything Store* “A wonderfully written and insightful history of a great but beleaguered American institution. Devin Leonard brings the story of the Postal Service to life with memorable characters, from Benjamin Franklin to Franklin Roosevelt and many others, with cameos from the likes of William Faulkner and Ethel Merman. Who knew that the Postal Service had such a colorful history? Luckily, Devin Leonard knew it, and now so do we.”—Terry Golway, author of *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* “In *Neither Snow nor Rain*, Devin Leonard tells the fascinating (yes, fascinating!) story of an endangered species, the US Postal Service. Leonard’s well-told story, which shows that mail delivery is a critical part of a functioning civilization, will be eye-opening to those who think the USPS should go the way of the buggy whip.”—Bethany McLean, co-author of *The Smartest Guys in the Room* and *All the Devils Are Here*