



Transnational influence on the development of United States parcel post, 1887–1984

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While the United States was an early advocate for international postal reform, it lagged in implementing some of those reforms. The US was one of the world's last major nations to establish a domestic parcel post, and among the last to accede to the UPU Postal Parcels Agreement. Long after most of the world's nations had signed up to that Agreement, the US maintained an array of bilateral and multilateral agreements. When the UPU concluded its first international parcel post convention in 1880, the US had no domestic parcel post. The barriers to domestic parcel post in the US were geographic, technological, and political. The political impediments to domestic parcel post were rooted in the economic philosophy of *laissez-faire*. The opponents of domestic parcel post delayed its establishment for three decades. At the same time, a variety of transnational forces influenced the development of US domestic and international parcel post.

Protectionism was a driving force in US international parcel post policy. European powers were seen as economic rivals. The United States favoured parcel post agreements with Western Hemisphere countries, while avoiding agreements with European nations. When the US eventually entered European agreements, they were more limited than the agreements with American nations. Following the successful introduction of domestic parcel post in 1913, the US did not join the UPU agreement on parcels, and continued to negotiate bilateral agreements. Following the UPU's 1920 Madrid Congress, representatives of nations from the Western Hemisphere opted to form a postal union of nations of their own. In 1921 the US joined the Pan-American Postal Union (now the Postal Union of the Americas, Spain and Portugal, or PUASP) and subscribed to its parcel post agreements.

World War II caused a dramatic shift in US parcel post, due to new economic realities, political realignments, and technological advances. The economies of most European and Asian nations were in ruins after the war. Former US competitors were suddenly partners in the mutual project of rebuilding.

US policy on international parcels adjusted accordingly. Though still based on bilateral agreements, protectionism took a back seat to easing the flow of parcels to war-torn regions. Wartime advances in transportation facilitated the post-war movement of goods, including air parcel post. Containerization and computerization streamlined the handling of parcels. New technologies increased demand for goods and for faster delivery. In the 1960s and 1970s, the UPU devised methods for parcels to travel and clear customs more quickly. The UPU worked to refine rates and regulations, and tackled the thorny issues of terminal dues, transit charges, and land and sea rates. A lack of consensus and new technologies created openings for private sector competition. Reorganization of the postal administrations in many countries, including the USPS, required them to be self-funded. The world's postal administrations faced an increasingly competitive global parcel post network. At the 1984 Hamburg Congress, these transnational forces came to a head and impelled the US to join the UPU Postal Parcels Agreement.