



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 21, 2011

## Congressmen Can't Send Christmas Greetings, Commission Rules

Congressmen long ago granted themselves the privilege of mailing items to constituents at taxpayers' expense, a process called "franking." Usually such a mailing amounts to a barely disguised plea for reelection, bragging about how much pork the congressman has brought home and listing services he offers to his constituents.

There are numerous rules governing the content of franked mailings, but one in particular has attracted attention lately: a ban on the use of the phrase "Merry Christmas." A congressional staffer told the [Washington Examiner's Mark Tapscott](#) that after he submitted a draft mailing to the House Franking Commission to determine whether it could be franked, the commission responded with a memo stating that the inclusion of "Merry Christmas" in an otherwise acceptable mailing is prohibited. In fact, no mention of any specific holiday is allowed — not Christmas, not Hanukkah, and not New Year's Day.



Members of Congress are prohibited from franking "greetings, including holiday celebrations, condolences, and congratulations for personal distinctions (wedding anniversaries, birthdays, etc.)," according to the [Members' Congressional Handbook](#). The Franking Commission, however, went beyond that simple, commonsense ban on taxpayer reimbursement of purely personal greetings, stating in its memo: "You may make reference to the season as a whole using language along the lines of 'Have a safe and happy holiday season.' It may only be incidental to the piece rather than the primary purpose of the communication."

Salley Wood, spokesperson for the Franking Commission, confirmed this in an interview with the *Examiner*, saying, "Currently, incidental use of the phrase Happy Holidays is permissible but Merry Christmas is not."

This, Fox News Channel's [Bill O'Reilly](#) opined, is "incredibly dumb." Christmas and New Year's are both [federal holidays](#). Why should elected officials be prohibited from mentioning them in mail to their constituents? He added:

Now, I don't want to be picking up the tab for Nancy Pelosi's holiday card list. I support the ban on that. But at the end of Nancy's assertion that her wisdom is saving the USA from peril, she should be allowed to say Merry Christmas. Not that she would ever say that but she should be



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allowed.

A congressional staffer told [The Hill](#) that none of this is the Franking Commission's doing; it has been the law of the land since 1974. Curiously, though, the Senate Ethics Committee, which oversees franking for its chamber of Congress, allows Senators to add specific holiday greetings to their franked mailings, Tapscott reported. It even permits them to "use officially related funds to mail holiday cards to constituents," he noted.

It would appear, then, that the House Franking Commission is interpreting the law more broadly than the Senate Ethics Committee. It may also be the case that House commission, as some suspect, is using the law as an excuse to expunge Christmas from congressional communications, providing, in Tapscott's words, "another demonstration that political correctness and freedom of speech, faith and thought are utterly incompatible."

Among those agreeing with Tapscott are two congressmen, Reps. Joe Walsh (R-Ill.) and Mike Ross (D-Ark.), who have written a letter to the House leadership asking that the franking rules be revised to permit holiday greetings. In the letter they state that the "policy prevents Members of Congress from addressing their constituents in the manner in which they feel is best and is just one more way political correctness is slowly dismantling the meaning of the Christmas and Hanukkah season."

They continue:

The purpose of the Franking Commission is to ensure taxpayer dollars are used to inform constituents of important matters and that franking privileges are not abused for political purposes. We are not celebrating winter this December. We are celebrating significant moments in two religions that have fundamentally shaped our nation — and as Members of Congress who represent thousands of constituents celebrating these holidays, we ask you to reconsider these outdated and restrictive rules.

Whether Walsh and Ross will succeed remains to be seen. Certainly there is no good reason why, as Tapscott observed, "the elected representatives of the nation that puts 'In God We Trust' on its currency are not permitted to use the greeting that has likely been uttered by every living adult American at least once in their lifetimes." That is especially true given that Senators are not bound by the same strictures.

On the other hand, maybe a better Christmas — er, holiday — present for taxpayers would be to revoke Congress's privilege to send any mail at our expense. Who knows? Getting rid of "free" congressional mailings might just lighten the struggling U.S. Postal Service's load enough to enable it to continue delivering mail people actually want to receive.



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