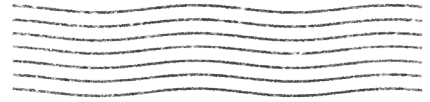
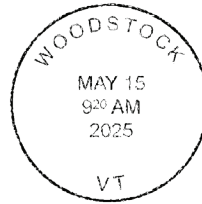




LETTER FROM WOODSTOCK



Refoundation

Rolf Diamant

There are constraints writing a triannual column in a country that is changing as fast as ours. As I begin this 35th Letter from Woodstock, I find it exceedingly difficult to keep up with all the actions being taken to hollow out and deconstruct services provided to the American people by their government. I recall a previous column about a visit to the city of Siena's Palazzo Pubblico and its famous frescoes depicting the "virtues of good government." Painted by the 14th-century artist Ambrogio Lorenzetti, one wall-sized fresco depicts the "Court of the Common Good" reigning over a countryside of civic virtue, governed with "Peace, Magnanimity, and Justice." On the opposite wall is a darker fresco, a totally different landscape, ruled over with "Avarice, Pride, and Vainglory." Flying overhead is a wraith-like figure named Fear, holding aloft a banner that begins: "Because each seeks only his own good...." This cautionary allegory requires no contemporary interpretation.

In this Letter I will step back from the cascading catalogue of all the human and institutional damage being done across America, and focus on the future of the country's besieged national parks. When the 1916 National Park Service Act established a government bureau to professionally manage a growing portfolio of national parks, it was intentionally called a *service*. As former National Park Service (NPS) leader Denis Galvin recently reminded us, "The National Park Service, not surprisingly, is a service organization. And to be a service organization you need ... good people.... So that to the extent that these [staff] reductions remove people from that equation—trained people, dedicated people—who are devoted to telling the park story and dedicated to protecting the park resources, the results could be catastrophic."

There is no way to spin what is happening. No one is fooled by the thinnest of verbal smokescreens, spurious claims about "strengthening our ability to serve the public," "embracing new opportunities for optimization and innovation in workforce management," or "working around obstacles to provide memorable experiences," as thousands of NPS employees disappear. Strip away the administration's meaningless and deceptive rhetoric, and we are left with a knee-capped NPS and a crippled national park system.

NPS is losing key staff at both ends of the workforce spectrum. There is the wholesale termination of a generation of younger employees—the agency's future. And there is the firing or incentivized resignation and retirement of many

of its most experienced professionals and managers—the organization’s knowledge base. The purge is indeed, in Galvin’s words, “catastrophic,” but it is also heartbreaking. One departing staff person poignantly wrote:

This week I wind down my job at the National Park Service—Friday will be my last day. I have had the great privilege of spending my career working in and around some of the most naturally spectacular and culturally and historically meaningful places in our nation. And I’ve been equally privileged to have worked with people with unparalleled talent and passion.... Please join me in thanking the thousands of dedicated National Park Service employees who quietly slipped off into the sunset yesterday. From GS 5 Interpretive Rangers to SES Regional Directors, an amazing cadre of honorable public servants, who devoted entire careers to protecting and preserving our shared natural and cultural heritage, walked away from jobs they loved without fanfare or ceremony.

It is deeply disheartening to know that some of you, despite long and admirable careers, were forced to leave your posts not by choice, but by circumstance.... Please know that the manner of your departure does not reflect the value of your work, the respect you’ve earned, and your place in NPS history. And know that the legacy you’ve built continues in every preserved view, every protected species, every inspired visitor or scientist, and every ranger who follows in your footsteps. You may no longer wear the uniform or report to the office, but your impact endures in the lands you’ve loved and served so well.

The human toll on NPS is destructive enough, but worse may yet follow. The national park system, painstakingly built up and preserved for more than a century, has always been a target for those antagonistic to protected public lands and the concept of universal access. This was made explicit in the

president’s budget for Fiscal Year 2026, which calls for an astonishing \$1 billion in cuts to NPS and imagines the transfer of an unspecified number of national park system units to state control. If carried through, the proposed budget would represent one of the most far-reaching acts of civic vandalism in the nation’s history.

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The accompanying budget message, borrowing a page from corporate raiders, implied that smaller, “less profitable” park units should be spun off, or starved of resources and left to wither on the vine, while the largest marquee parks are spared the most draconian cuts. But there is no reason to believe that the administration would stop there. For example, we are already hearing about proposals being floated that would scale back national monuments to facilitate energy development projects. Beyond demonstrating a palpable disrespect for public servants, and overt hostility to the integrity and continuity of a great national park system, these actions create opportunities for self-dealing and profiteering. A weakened and demoralized agency will be increasingly vulnerable to privatization of long-established NPS functions, and possibly to the progressive dismemberment of the system that the 2026 presidential budget—if enacted by Congress—would set in motion.

In such scenarios, NPS programs devoted to park science, history, education, natural and cultural resources management, and community technical assistance, would be drastically rolled back or eliminated. Priority would be given to keeping the largest parks open and trying to maintain a veneer of normality. The proposed 2026 budget narrative makes the specious claim that “a large number of sites ... are not ‘National Parks,’ in the traditionally understood sense”: an incredibly shallow and superficial characterization of today’s national park system and its extraordinary breadth of places and programs. Once described as “America’s university without walls,” that is “accessible to all for the benefit of all,” the system, in its entirety, protects and interprets the natural and cultural heritage of the nation. That heritage can be complex and nuanced. As I wrote in a previous column, “the national park system is both Independence Hall and Manzanar Internment Camp: one representing ideals of freedom and justice for all, and the other the hard lessons learned when both are denied to any group of Americans.”

There are also ideologically driven agendas at work that intentionally seek to suppress vital work on immediate threats, most notably our climate emergency. The staffing purge has stripped parks and NPS offices of specialized people with the knowledge and skills needed to strengthen resiliency in the face of accelerating environmental change. Even in the so-called “crown jewel” parks, attention will likely be focused primarily on “façade management,” while the overall stewardship of critical park resources takes a distant back seat.

This dystopian future is not pre-ordained. A well-informed and vigilant public can help push back. I ended my previous Letter from Woodstock, an interview with Italian park leader Maurilio Cipparone, with his observation that “looking down the road, no doubt the whole system of protected areas in Italy will need a refoundation. I sincerely hope this will not be necessary in the United States.” We now recognize that such a refoundation will be needed here in the US as well. Even if the worst excesses are prevented, the human debris field already left in the administration’s wake may take a very long time to set right.

It is important to explain what is meant by this somewhat unusual word, “refoundation.” To “refound” something means to lay its foundations anew—not simply restore the status quo. The extent of the damage being done, and the rapidity with which it has been accomplished, have exposed critical vulnerabilities in the legal and political foundations of America’s national park system.

These vulnerabilities can only be fixed by a thoroughgoing reconsideration of the laws and funding mechanisms that govern our national parks—a true *refoundation*. Like any public agency, the National Park Service cannot be made absolutely invulnerable to hostile political interference, but—driven by a powerful movement of concerned citizens—its future can be made more independent and secure.

We must begin to prepare, even now, for this rescue. Many initial efforts are already underway. One example is the George Wright Society’s Stewardship Archive, a project to safeguard essential digital information that previously resided unexpurgated on the webpages of federal agencies responsible for public lands. This undertaking protects vulnerable data required for rebuilding vital organizations, programs, and partnerships, necessary for science and scholarship-based restoration and stewardship of America’s public lands, waters, and places of cultural heritage.

The day will come when our parks are once more embraced as a cornerstone of American democracy, as first envisioned by Frederick Law Olmsted in his landmark 1865 Yosemite Report. This refoundation will take much time and incredible effort, but if we adhere to the Yosemite Report’s stated principles of “equity and benevolence,” one of America’s best ideas may yet again regain its footing in our beleaguered land.

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