

Hello, All!

Please think twice before using government resources for personal reasons . . . especially for sending out your holiday greetings.

**Military Officer Sent Best Wishes on the Cheap, and You Paid.** According to sworn testimony and documents uncovered by a military service Inspector General inquiry, a senior military officer and his wife had a subordinate service member print out on a Government office computer official cards containing their holiday greetings, which they then signed, enclosed in official envelopes with printed labels, and sent to about 100 addresses. Some of their greetings were sent overseas to foreign officials using Government postage and marked “Official Business.” This conduct occurred as one of a series of alleged offenses that resulted in the officer being relieved of command, issued a punitive letter of reprimand, and ordered to forfeit \$1,000.

The Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees of the Executive Branch, 5 C.F.R. § 2635.101, lays out basic obligations for and restrictions upon public service, and it forbids the use of Government resources “for other than authorized activities” (5 C.F.R. § 2635.101(b)(9)). It thus bars the use of all of the Government resources the officer and his wife used to produce and to send the greeting cards. Moreover, 18 U.S.C. § 1719 (2003) mandates fines for anyone using an official envelope or label to avoid having to pay his or her own postage for private mail.

In this case, the official envelopes addressed to individuals overseas were improperly used to gain Government postage. Admittedly, section C1.4.9 of the Department of Defense (DoD) Official Mail Manual (DoD 4525.8-M, Dec. 26, 2001) authorizes the use of “appropriated fund postage” by DoD “activities . . . when international diplomacy dictates.” In this case, however, the officer’s greetings were not required for international diplomacy and were not sent on behalf of an “activity” but were from two individuals—the officer and his wife. They thus did not fall within the DoD exception.\*

There are a few situations where Government resources can be used for personal or unofficial reasons, but there are several criteria that must be met for such use. Generally, the use must not adversely affect official duty performance; it must be of reasonable duration and frequency, and, wherever possible, done during personal time; it must serve a legitimate public interest (such as keeping employees at their desks, enhancing professional skills of employees, etc.); it may not reflect adversely on the DoD; and it may not overburden the system or create significant additional cost to DoD. The supervisor (or agency designee), not the individual, makes these determinations.

Rather than trying to figure out for yourself if personal use of a government resource is permissible, ask your organization’s Ethics Counselor. The point of contact at my office is Jason Smith, [jason.bowers.smith@us.army.mil](mailto:jason.bowers.smith@us.army.mil).

Bottom line: Enjoy the holidays, but write and print those family newsletters at home . . . and use your own stamps!

\*Excerpt taken from: Encyclopedia of Ethical Failures, Department of Defense Office of General Counsel, Standards of Conduct Office, April 2007.

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