

This Day in History... April 3, 1991

First U.S. Stamp Printed Outside America

On April 3, 1991, the USPS issued its first stamp to printed outside the US. News of the stamp's printing outside of America set off a firestorm of criticism and debate that made it all the way to Congress.

The stamp at the center of this controversy was a Great Americans issue honoring Dennis Chavez, the first American-born Hispanic person to serve in the US Senate. The stamp was announced a year earlier in February 1990. At that time, the denomination was unknown as new rates were expected in 1991. By 1991, the denomination was set at 35¢, which was the rate for a half-ounce stamp to Mexico.



This was the first US stamp printed outside the country.

The expected rate change came on February 3, and the Chavez stamp was announced for issue on April 3. A USPS news release mistakenly stated the stamp was printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP). However, it was actually printed by the Canadian Bank Note Company, a subcontractor of Stamp Venturers of Fairfax, Virginia. Because of the rate increase, there was an increased demand for new stamps and the USPS believed the BEP would be too overloaded to print them all. Making contracts with private companies wasn't new, but that company being outside of the US – in Canada – was. The USPS claimed that there weren't many American companies that offered the intaglio printing process they had used on all the previous Great Americans stamps.

The USPS stated that the arrangement didn't violate the "Buy America" Act, which required government agencies to use American-made products as much as possible. According to the USPS, more than two-thirds of the work on the Chavez stamp would be done in the US. It was printed on American-made paper and after printing in Ottawa, would be perforated back in the US.



This stamp was also printed by the Canadian Bank Note Company.

Despite these assurances, the USPS faced immediate backlash. *Linn's* issued a highly critical editorial calling it a "shameful spectacle," and that it was "outraged" at the "colossal embarrassment." *Linn's* went on to say, "One of the philatelic hallmarks of colonies and second-class nations has been that they have foreign firms print their stamps." While there were many that sided with *Linn's*, there were some that supported the idea. They believed the stamp (and others produced outside the US) had beautifully detailed engraving. And they claimed opposition to the stamp was "isolationist" and "economic protectionist."

Many others weighed in – including the House Committee on Post Office and Civil Service, who had serious concerns, stating "That a 'Great Americans' series stamp should be printed outside the United States is particularly disturbing... If legislation is necessary to ensure that future printing is done domestically, we will work with you to develop that legislation."

The postmaster general ultimately heard these calls and announced that no more stamps (after the 1992 Earl Warren stamp already in production) would be printed outside of the US.

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