

## U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY

## Press Center



## Lew Op-Ed: Why We Serve

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**WASHINGTON** – In an op-ed published this morning by the Federal Times and to be included in the May issue of Federal Times Magazine, Treasury Secretary Jacob J. Lew reflects during Public Service Recognition Week on his experiences working with dedicated public servants since 1973 and expresses his gratitude for the more than 100,000 dedicated women and men who meet the Treasury Department's responsibilities every day in offices throughout the United States and around the globe.

Read the piece [online](#).

### Why We Serve

By Jacob J. Lew

I began my career in public service in 1973 and spent a decade working on the Hill, eight years as an aide to former House speaker Thomas P. O'Neill. That era is now remembered as the Halcyon days of bipartisanship, but at the time, we felt like we lived in the most polarized period in history. Serving now in my fifteenth year in the Administrations of President Clinton and President Obama, I have learned that we cannot let nostalgia or memory become an explanation for why it is impossible to get things done today. In reality, stark differences animated the political climate during those years just as they do now, and today, just as then, we can work past them to make a difference on behalf of the American people. That is the essence of public service — finding solutions to move our nation forward.

Speaker O'Neill — a towering figure with thick white hair — believed wholeheartedly in the enterprise of government, and, in particular, he saw serving your country as a charge to help the middle class and those struggling to get in the middle class. He once wrote, "[E]very family deserves the opportunity to earn an income, own a home, educate their children, and afford medical care. That is the American dream, and ... the federal government has an obligation to help you along the line until you achieve that dream. And when you do, you have an obligation to help out the next group that comes along."

This commitment to social justice and the ideals of the New Deal underpinned Mr. O'Neill's economic approach — an approach that contrasted sharply with President Ronald Reagan's conservative outlook. Still, Reagan and O'Neill were both devoted to seeing America succeed, and they were able to reach honorable compromises to get things done. As a consequence, I had the privilege of working on a number of historic bipartisan reforms, including Social Security, tax reform, and immigration reform.

Today, at the Treasury, I am honored to serve with more than 100,000 dedicated women and men who meet our department's responsibilities every day in offices throughout the United States and around the globe. Notwithstanding turbulent politics and unfair treatment, the resolve of our public servants has been rock solid, and it has helped propel an economy that is the largest in the world. We help protect our financial system and safeguard our currency from counterfeiters. We collect the revenue that provides for our national defense and finances our roads, bridges, ports and airports. And we confront threats posed by cyber-attacks.

Of course, even though government service is a noble calling, federal employees see the value of their work questioned and many feel unappreciated. This sentiment is fueled, in part, by partisan gridlock, which has, in recent years, limited our government's ability to function smoothly. Political brinkmanship has also led to sequestration and a government shutdown —further eroding the morale of federal employees.

Still, for all of our political system's problems, the things that divide us are not insurmountable. . Throughout my entire career, I have seen public servants get past partisan differences to find common ground. And I am convinced that our political system is capable today, as it has been throughout our history, to work on a bipartisan basis and meet the challenges of the day.

Look at our recent success in finally tackling the so-called "doc fix"—that is, making sure doctors who care for Medicare patients do not face arbitrary cuts in their pay. After 13 years of trying to get this done, the President and members of Congress from both parties passed legislation to put this manufactured crisis behind us and strengthen the health care system. This bipartisan legislation is not only a breakthrough for physicians, it is a major step forward for those who depend on Medicare, especially seniors and people with disabilities. This achievement builds on the historic progress made by the Affordable Care Act, which, thanks to the skill and professionalism of federal employees across government, has allowed more than 16 million Americans to gain the economic security of health care coverage.

We have the ability, no matter what the political climate is like, to serve the American people well. President Teddy Roosevelt once noted that life's greatest gift is the opportunity to work hard at work worth doing. The work you do as federal employees is worth doing, it is indispensable to our democracy, and it is part of the remarkable tradition that has built America and shaped the world.

*Jacob J. Lew is Secretary of the Treasury*

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