



In unprecedented move, Treasury orders Trump's name printed on stimulus checks

By **Lisa Rein**

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The Treasury Department has ordered President Trump's name be printed on stimulus checks the Internal Revenue Service is rushing to send to tens of millions of Americans, a process that could slow their delivery by a few days, senior IRS officials said.

The unprecedented decision, finalized late Monday, means that when recipients open the \$1,200 paper checks the IRS is scheduled to begin sending to 70 million Americans in coming days, "President Donald J. Trump" will appear on the left side of the payment.

It will be the first time a president's name appears on an IRS disbursement, whether a routine refund or one of the handful of checks the government has issued to taxpayers in recent decades either to stimulate a down economy or share the dividends of a strong one.

Treasury officials disputed that the checks would be delayed.

While some people receiving the checks — the centerpiece of the U.S. government's economic relief package to stave of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic — may not care, or observe, whose name appears on them, the decision is another sign of Trump's effort to cast his response to the pandemic in political terms.

Trump had privately suggested to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who oversees the IRS, to allow the president to formally sign the checks, according to three administration officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

But the president is not an authorized signer for legal disbursements by the U.S. Treasury. It is standard practice for a civil servant to sign checks issued by the Treasury Department to ensure that government payments are nonpartisan.

The checks will instead bear Trump's name in the memo line, below a line that reads, "Economic Impact Payment," the administration officials said.

The IRS will mail the checks to people for whom it does not have banking information. Many of them have low incomes.

The checks will carry the signature of an official with the Bureau of the Fiscal Service, the Treasury Department division that prints the checks. The checks will follow direct deposits issued in recent days to the bank accounts of about 80 million people. Those payments do not include Trump's name.

The decision to have the paper checks bear Trump's name, in the works for weeks, according to a Treasury official, was announced early Tuesday to the IRS's information technology team. The team, working from home, is now racing to implement a programming change that two senior IRS officials said will probably lead to a delay in issuing the first batch of paper checks. They are scheduled to be sent Thursday to the Bureau of the Fiscal Service for printing and issuing.

Computer code must be changed to include the president's name, and the system must be tested, these officials said. "Any last minute request like this will create a downstream snarl that will result in a delay," said Chad Hooper, a quality-control manager who serves as national president of the IRS's Professional Managers Association.

A Treasury Department representative, however, denied any delay and said the plan all along was to issue the checks next week.

"Economic Impact Payment checks are scheduled to go out on time and exactly as planned—there is absolutely no delay whatsoever," the representative said in a written statement. She said this was a faster process than the stimulus checks the George W. Bush administration issued in 2008 to head off a looming recession.

"In fact, we expect the first checks to be in the mail early next week which is well in advance of when the first checks went out in 2008 and well in advance of initial estimates," the statement said.

An IRS representative referred questions to the Treasury Department.

The paper checks are scheduled to be issued at a rate of 5 million each week until September, starting with the lowest-income taxpayers.

The \$2 trillion stimulus, the government's largest and most recent coronavirus rescue package, was passed by a bipartisan Congress and signed by the president. The checks to individual taxpayers were not originally Trump's idea, but he embraced them after Sens. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) and Mitt Romney (R-Utah) proposed them.

The White House had initially floated a payroll tax cut as a centerpiece of its stimulus effort but backed off that plan amid concerns it would not reach American households quickly enough.

Trump has repeatedly called the legislation “a Trump administration initiative” and placed himself singularly at the center of what the government is doing to help Americans during the coronavirus response — taking full credit.

About six months before he faces reelection, with his campaign on pause because the virus has prevented him from holding the rallies that are popular with his base, the checks provide Trump with a new form of retail politics. A check provides a touchable, bread-and-butter symbol to taxpayers right in their mailboxes.

But to critics and some IRS employees, many of whom started to learn of the decision on Tuesday, the presence of Trump’s name on the checks reeks of partisanship in a corner of the government that touches all Americans and has, since the Nixon era, steadfastly steered clear of politics. After President Richard Nixon targeted a wide range of “enemy” groups for tax audits, including civil rights groups, reporters and prominent Democrats, Congress enacted laws to ensure that the agency conducts itself apolitically.

“Taxes are supposed to be nonpolitical, and it’s that simple,” said Nina Olson, who stepped down last fall after an 18-year tenure as the National Taxpayer Advocate, leading an arm of the IRS that helps individual taxpayers resolve tax problems, manages clinics for low-income taxpayers and advises the agency on service issues.

“It’s absolutely unprecedented,” Olson said.

She recalled that when the Bush administration delivered economic rebate checks of \$300 to \$600 to taxpayers in 2001 to share the benefits of a strong economy, the White House asked the IRS to include in a letter to taxpayers a sentence that took credit for “giving you your money back.”

The IRS commissioner at the time refused, Olson recalled, because the move was perceived as too political.

When the Bush administration launched its \$168 billion economic stimulus package in 2008, the checks were signed by a treasury official.

Only the IRS commissioner and general counsel are politically appointed. The current, Trump-appointed commissioner, Charles Rettig, a tax attorney confirmed by the Senate in 2018, was appointed to a five-year term designed to carry over into a possible new administration.

Hooper, the president of the Professional Managers Association, said he was appalled by what he called “an abuse of government resources.”

“In this time of need for additional resources,” Hooper said, “anything that takes our focus from getting those checks out the door and hampers the equitable, fair administration of the tax code is not something we can support.”

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) has dismissed suggestions about Trump signing checks or having his name attached. Last week she said the payments should go out as quickly as possible without “waiting for a fancy-Dan letter from the president.”

About 150 million Americans and others are expected to receive the one-time payment. The first wave of recipients includes mainly people who filed a 2018 or 2019 tax return and gave the IRS their direct deposit information.

Under the stimulus plan, single filers earning up to \$75,000 a year receive a payment of \$1,200. Married couples earning up to \$150,000 a year receive a payment of \$2,400. Parents receive an additional \$500 for each child under 17.

Erica Werner contributed to this report.

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