

A Modest Proposal for Congress

by Frank Schuchat



In director Robert Altman's 1976 movie "Buffalo Bill and the Indians, or Sitting Bull's History Lesson," there is a scene where Buffalo Bill, played by Paul Newman, welcomes the President of the United States to his famed Wild West Show with some florid remarks. When he's finished, Buffalo Bill's promoter, played by Burt Lancaster, brags to the President

that Bill writes all of his speeches himself. The President is at a loss for words and unable to reply until an aide whispers in his ear, and the President repeats, "All great men do."

Which leads me to the topic of congressional staff. We all know that so many of our members of Congress are far too busy stockpiling campaign contributions during the all too brief 24-month interlude between election days to be able to devote any significant time to really learn about mundane topics such as annual appropriations and the tax code. Representatives and senators rely to a large extent on their taxpayer-funded personal staff to keep track of the business of our national legislature and to inform them on how to vote. (Admittedly, they also have lobbyists to tell them how to vote.)

I do recognize that in many walks of life, busy, important people with crowded calendars have to rely on underlings to sweat the details; however, does the average American know that the annual allowance for a member of Congress is in the millions, and is generally more than the average annual revenue of the average small business in this country?

And included with that is the franking privilege, so congressional offices don't have to pay for postage. (And they also get free quill pens.)

Moreover, representatives and senators are not charged rent for office space in the Capitol and adjacent buildings, which are all government-owned and without a mortgage. (That is at least until some slick banker steers the Congress into a sale and leaseback transaction for the Capitol to raise quick money for the government and big fees for the banker.)

The need for more and more personal staff to advance one's political ambitions—and damn the cost—is one of the few subjects on which almost all members of Congress seem to agree, whether they are Republicans or Democrats. And their passion for this kind of job creation knows no bounds. But in an economic and political climate where police officers, firefighters, and teachers are being let go across

the country, do we really need and can we really afford all of this ever-expanding infrastructure for 535 legislators? I don't think so.

Let's have the members do more of the substantive work themselves. That might even necessitate some intellectual commitment and trigger a genuine effort to learn about and address some very complicated topics. We may even see congressional hearings where the committee members become so involved in genuine inquiry they actually ask witnesses questions instead of delivering speeches, which sometimes have to do with nothing at all.

You might ask, where will members of Congress find the time? First of all, they could work a five-day week instead of three and bag those months-long recesses. Second, it is not necessary to go "home" every weekend. Their constituents will not hold it against them if they use their time in Washington to really apply themselves to the task of being competent and well-informed legislators.

I feel very strongly about cutting this excess in congressional staff costs as a way to save taxpayer money and promote a more hardworking and informed set of national legislators.

And an added long-term bonus of a reduction of congressional staff positions is that fewer staff means fewer future Washington lobbyists, because a perch on K Street is often seen as an entitlement for those who toil for a member of Congress.

I feel very strongly about cutting this excess in congressional staff costs as a way to save taxpayer money and promote a more hardworking and informed set of national legislators. I also want to cut government spending in this category to send a message to this Congress that something needs to change. But don't confuse me with the Tea Party movement. In fact, I believe that if serving in Congress meant you had to do your own homework, most Tea Party candidates would lose interest. ■

Frank Schuchat is a founding member of Schuchat, Herzog & Brenman LLC, and is a practitioner of stand-up comedy, in addition to the law.