

Letter to Lucy

Subject: *national debt, cooking frogs
and a trillion seconds*

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It hardly seems possible that two months have passed since we saw you at Christmastime. The weeks seem to slip away at a faster clip than they used to. That's a sign of one of two things: either I'm busier than I wish I were, or I'm older than I'd like to be. If it's the former, taking time out to write this letter to you is a nice little break in my routine. If it's the latter (which is more likely), there's nothing to be done but grin and bear it.

Speaking of time, the season draws nigh to sit down and put our affairs in order so that we can make our annual contribution to the country and the IRS.

Have just read an article explaining why the proposed Federal Budget for 1985 is \$925+ billion. That is very near one trillion dollars. Because budgets keep rising every year, I am reminded of how you can cook a frog without causing the animal any pain or distress.

How? Well, now, you know that if you drop a frog into a shallow pan of hot water, it will immediately leap out. But, if you put the frog into a pan of cold water, and slowly heat the water, the frog (being "cold blooded") will adjust gradually to the change. Finally you will have cooked the frog. I think we are being "cooked."

A trillion dollars is an incomprehensible amount of money. Nobody can begin to visualize its immensity. Most people can visually conceive of a group made up of three items, or even six, but at seven items, most people begin to count . . . 1, 2,

3, etc. It's almost impossible to visualize, say, 23 chickens. And if we talk about 23 hundred, . . . forget it.

And yet, we hear all about the millions of dollars we are spending for this, and the billions of dollars we need to spend for that, and now we're expected to comprehend such an enormous number as a trillion. It can be done. Take some tiny measurements to start with and prepare yourself to stretch your imagination.

We know about how long a second is. We can count: a-one-and-a-two-and-a-three-and-a . . . sixty seconds in a minute, 3600 seconds in an hour, about 90,000 (86,400, actually) seconds in a day. A million seconds is eleven-and-a-half days.

How about a billion seconds? If you sit down at your calculator and punch in a few numbers, you'll find a billion seconds works out to be about thirty-three years!

Now, what about a trillion? Well, a trillion seconds is one thousand billion, so a trillion seconds is 33,000 years. Just think . . . a trillion seconds ago, there was a glacier covering the part of the planet where Cape Cod is now!

And, by the time we get around to paying off the national debt, if we pay it off at the rate of one dollar every second, and if all the interest on the debt is forgiven, starting now, and if we never borrow any more money to run the government, or fight a war, or explore space, or support a foreign

government, or to help the poor, or to increase the pay of federal employees, at the end of 33,000 years, we will no longer owe any money.

That's why I think we're like the frog that's being "cooked" painlessly. What have you done with your 1099 forms? Papered your bathroom walls? If so, you can invite the IRS agent to come to the house to audit your return.

Lucy, in another two months we'll be writing those checks to the Internal Revenue Service. It will be mud season. Ron Reagan and Tip O'Neill will still be arguing about what is the best way to reduce the deficit. And neither will give one inch! What do you want to bet?

And Lucy, in the evening on April 15th, if you step outside the door and listen, you'll probably be able to hear the peepers singing their love songs. All those little frogs . . .

Much love,
Oliver