

CAPSTONE - "A Modest Legislative Proposal"

Advisor: Adam Tamashasky

Zach Bernstein

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Reflection Essay

Looking back on the writing process for "A Modest Legislative Proposal," I would definitely say I have enjoyed writing it. Part of it is the fact that it is a creative project, which I certainly prefer to research papers. Part of it is my love for satire, particularly Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal," which this piece was heavily inspired by. Generally, it has been one of the most fun writing experiences I have had probably in my entire academic career.

Interestingly, as late as a couple of weeks before the semester started, I was not sure what I was going to write my Capstone on. I had been brainstorming, and I had some ideas - all creative, since I really did not want to do a research paper, and most of those related to politics in some way, since I am graduating with a Political Science degree. But none of them were really great ideas, and despite the recommendation from the Honors program that students start early on their Capstones, I wasn't ready to begin. (I also did not have an advisor until a couple of weeks into the semester, since I transferred into American after my freshman year and did not take College Writing courses here.) It was on my mind a lot, no matter how much I tried not to think about it (and I admit I did try not to think about it for a while).

There was, however, something else going on that summer that I couldn't forget about, no matter how much I wanted to: a Congressional debate over the debt ceiling. Generally, raising the limit was a mere formality, but this time, there was a major and protracted debate over how much spending would be cut in order for the borrowing limit

to be raised. Two subjects seemed to come up a lot: Taxes and entitlements. Both sides criticized each other for not compromising on those issues, which meant that there would not be any lasting solutions - and that we would probably have to hear about them again. There was a lot of finger-pointing and preening for the cameras, and a lot of effort to try and make the other side look bad, but not much in the way of solutions. It was not Congress' finest hour.

I had been toying with the idea of bringing Jonathan Swift, and his famous essay, into the Capstone somehow. The debt ceiling debate made me think about doing that with the entitlement issue. Originally, the idea was how Jonathan Swift would "propose" to deal with entitlements - a more modern version of his essay. As is the case in this novella, the "solution" was to kill the elderly. After running the idea by some fresh ears - more specifically, my parents - it turned into a story of how such a bill would pass in an alternate universe.

Also in the news that summer were reports that the zombie novel World War Z was being turned into a movie. I had read parts of the book before, and that inspired me to write this story in an epistolary format, though mine was not centered on interviews but "recently discovered" sources. I liked the idea of writing it in that style, and did not feel like it would work out as well in the traditional narrative style. Part of that was probably me not being sure that I could do as good of a job with the story in that more traditional style.

After coming up with the idea, which was probably the hardest part of the whole process, I had to decide what I was going to use to tell the story. Having studied Political Science for a few years, I had some idea of how the legislative process worked.

That meant I had some ideas on how to tell the story - moving the bill through committee, maybe a conference to reconcile the different versions passed by the House and Senate, etc. When it came to actually telling the story, and what kind of entries I would use to do that, I ran into some trouble. For about the first half of the process, I could generally come up with another idea pretty quickly after writing the one before it (such as putting in speeches made on the floor of the House, a letter sent by a Chamber of Commerce-style organization). After a while, the creative juices stopped flowing quite so freely. I was able to come up with other ideas, especially after having a strategy session or two with my advisor, Professor Tamashasky. A lot of those new ideas were things like Sarah Palin-style “Facebook” notes or a scandal surrounding one of the Senators backing this bill. (My original idea for that was a sex scandal modeled after the ones facing then-GOP presidential candidate Herman Cain, but it turned into a birth certificate scandal broken by a tabloid, as with the John Edwards scandal.) We even discussed the idea of chat room transcripts, which I decided not to include. But it was a completely different way of looking at the project. Up until that point, I had been including all the “usual suspects,” like news articles or fake legislation (which, incidentally, was the worst part of the actual writing, due to the fact that I wanted to format it to look exactly like a real piece of legislation and that was particularly time-consuming). I had not been thinking particularly outside the box when it came to how I was going to tell the story; I had a lot of ideas, but I did not want it to seem stale, like I was over-relying on one kind of storytelling. Those discussions with Professor Tamashasky cemented the storyline.

One of the best things about doing a creative project was that it allowed me to turn the real world on its head in any way I wanted or needed. In order to make the story work, for example, I turned senior citizens, usually a strong voting bloc which politicians are loathe to offend, into national pariahs blamed for everything that is wrong with the country. That helped me move the main story thread along, but also come up with some other story ideas, such as a protest where people become very agitated about the elderly, and then a push to make the bill tougher on senior citizens later on, which led to even more ideas. For the most part, that was how my writing process worked; I did not necessarily come in with a story fully fleshed out, but things kept snowballing as I went along. It may not be the best way to write in all cases, but it certainly worked out very well for my purposes.

When we met to talk about the first draft, Professor Tamashasky asked me if I had enjoyed writing the story. I told him I had; he responded that he could tell from reading it. That made me feel good. I was concerned that, despite how good I felt about the story when I was writing it, I had missed something substantial. But what I was hearing was encouraging, even if the draft I sent in was still in need of some edits. But I was also looking forward to going back and adding more things in. I went into that meeting knowing some edits would need to be made, but feeling very ready to write even more.

I have done plenty of research papers in the past, with varying degrees of success. Usually, when I have done well, it has been on subjects that are particularly interesting to me. Most times, the subject has not been of my choosing. Having that freedom did more than just allow me to write on something I knew about or was

interested in - it got me more invested in what I was writing. Apart from the deadlines and the fact that I needed a good grade on this to graduate from the Honors program, this did not feel like an assignment. It was - dare I say it? - fun. And going at it from the perspective of a fun exercise rather than a dry, regimented assignment made it easier to write, and, hopefully, better when it was written.