Origin of the Budget

February 23, 2004   **Robert W. Dorsey**

Preface

Budget, budget, who's got the budget? Well, while presenting this budget, I am not sure if I really "get" the budget. Some mystery still surrounds this monthly exercise, in regard to origins, title, content and procedures. Why in the world do we call a series of papers a budget? An explanation lies in Edward Merkel's contribution to a budget read on September 24, 1979, entitled "The Budget in Song and Story." Rollin Workman provided a copy of Edward's entertaining opus. Other copies are available on the desk. It is recommended reading. The paper traces origins to early Middle French. Bougette was a small leather bag or valise. When the English Parliament, long after the Norman Conquest, began regular accounting, the Chancellor of the Exchequer brought his report in a leather bag - a bougette - later in a leather covered case or box. Both the container and the contents became the budget.

For much of the history of the Club, the last meeting of the month was simply called informal night, and as reported by Club Historian John Diehl, the meetings were on Saturdays from approximately .1865-1929. These informal meetings were, in Edward Merkel's words, accompanied by drinking, singing, recitations, stories and poems, all of uneven quality. In an effort to upgrade the proceedings, senior members were charged with organizing the contents. Other members could submit items directly to the reader or, if wishing anonymity, could place them in a special box. One imaginative member thought that the box resembled the one used by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to carry the budget to Parliament - and thus the budget box - and later the renaming of informal nights to budgets. Although the budget box has fallen into disuse, it is still prominently displayed in our entry hall under the club roster. A recent review of contents offered: old nameplates, photos, letters, a copy of an historic club document, tissues, rubber bands, air fresheners, and an undated New Yorker cartoon showing a dignified speaker addressing a group of other men, with the caption, "Gentlemen, my talk today is entitled, 'Corporate Responsibility, Sound Fiscal Policy, and Farrah Fawcett-Majors'."

That leads to seminal questions regarding budgets: are three papers expected, should they connect in some way, and should they be of similar length? Other questions that spring from these include: how many papers should be authored by the reader and should the authorships be revealed at time of delivery? The answers to these questions seem guised in the uneven traditions of the budget.

Having heard half a hundred budgets, I offer responses to my own questions. Whereas three papers seem optimal, two have occasionally been read, and at least once, a continuous narrative was spun. Connectivity too is varied. A model of cleverly threaded papers was the budget read by Robert Vitz on March 31, 2003, about three eminent historians, written by three eminent historians, Professors Murray, Vitz, and Winkler the younger, and the budget was delivered in an historic baseball uniform. The most recent budget, read b Richard Gass in January, was linked by food. In other budgets the connections have been subjective or less.

Regarding authorship and length, this too is varied. A few years ago Robert Kaltoff announced the shortest budget paper in history and went on to read three or four sentences. This was followed by quite a long treatise and another of about ten minutes, all written by Robert. Revealing authorship? This is usually left to the secretary when reading minutes of the meetings, perhaps to allow some mystery and guesswork; but sometimes, as Nick Clooney did last fall, the writers are announced at time of reading. Indeed our Club is traditional, but also tolerant of some variability.

So, having considered these variables, the following budget is three papers, beyond this preface; two are mine bracketing one by Orloff Miller, whose entry is slightly shorter. There is some connectivity which may or may not be evident.