



Anneken, Huey & Moser^{PLLC}

Certified Public Accountants

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Here's the Tax Beat broadcast for May 20

Subject Line: The Group Project from Hell

There's a moment — every schoolkid knows it — when the teacher says the words that empty a classroom of all hope: "For this assignment, you'll be working in groups." Nobody cheers. Somebody groans. The smart kids start looking around to avoid that one weird twitchy kid who looks like there's a prison tattoo in his future. Because everybody knows the cast. There's the control freak who color-codes the slide deck. There's the ghost who shows up on presentation day after doing nothing. There's the guy who spends three hours arguing about the font. And there's the one well-meaning soul — let's call him you — who does 80% of the work and gets the same B-minus as everyone else.

Surveys show more than 60% of college students would rather take an exam than do a group project. Group projects don't teach collaboration. They teach *betrayal*. They're a sneak preview of every committee meeting, condo board, and task force you'll endure as an adult. Nobody who survived one would willingly sign up for another.

Here's the bad news: you got drafted into the biggest, longest group project in American history, and you've gotten your report card every April 15. The assignment? The Internal Revenue Code. The teacher is the IRS. The group is 535 constantly changing members of Congress. And the document — all 6,800 pages of it — has been under continuous revision since 1913, when the original crew turned in a tidy 27-page draft and went home for the summer.

That was the easy part. Every Congress since has been editing the same paper without ever finishing a sentence. They keep adding paragraphs, scribbling in the margins, scrawling on the back of cocktail napkins, and — this is the genius part — almost never deleting anything. The 1913 top rate was 7%. The 1944 top rate was 94%. After Reagan's 1986 simplification it was 28%. Today it's 37%, give or take a sunset. Each number represents a different group with a different idea of what the project was even about.

The contradictions bleed across the pages like red ink on a freshman essay. In 1898, Congress passed a "temporary" excise tax on long-distance phone calls to pay for the Spanish-American War. The war lasted ten weeks. The tax lasted 108 years. In 1969, a different Congress worried about single people getting a raw deal and accidentally invented the marriage penalty, which later Congresses have been half-fixing every fifteen years since. The Code still includes rules for fallout shelters next to rules for digital wallets. It rewards oil drilling on one page and solar panels on the next. It hands out tax breaks for racehorse owners and Olympic medalists, because somebody's senator knew somebody. And when Congress passed the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, they made most of its individual provisions automatically expire, kicking the whole thing back to the next group. The current crew patched some of it last summer in OBBBA. The next crew gets the rest.

Seriously, what else would you expect when 535 people from two parties, four generations, and fifty states co-author a document over 110 years without a deadline, an editor, or a sober adult in the room? It's the Wikipedia article from hell, and you owe whatever it tells you to owe.

The good news is that, unlike high school, you don't have to read it yourself. You don't have to argue with the stoner, the ghost, or the guy who squandered three hours on the font. You can hire someone whose job is turning 535 people's worst impulses into a strategy that works for one person — you. Nobody who survived a group project ever wanted to do another. But this one's mandatory — so call us, and let *us* be the kid who actually did the homework!

Kevin

