

I'd Never Cheat on my Taxes

Over the next three days, millions of procrastinating taxpayers will join me in collecting all our pertinent financial documents, sitting down at our kitchen tables and seriously considering fleeing to Canada where the federal tax code is undoubtedly more comprehensible than our own. Even if it's written in French.

Technically, Mozambique would be a better choice than Canada because it has no income tax at all. I don't know anything else about that country, but even if it's a cruelly oppressive dictatorship with death squads, secret police and a complete lack of Starbucks franchises, it seems a small price to pay to avoid filing income taxes.

I blame all of my current distress on the 16th amendment to the U.S. constitution, which was ratified in 1913 – it made the collection of federal income tax permanent. There is no doubt in my mind that it never would have passed if some guy had proposed the Federal Income Tax Code to the 1913 Congress in its current form (all 6,000 pages), saying “This is what I have in mind.” He would have been horsewhipped and condemned to a life term at the Institute for the Criminally Insane.

Filling out your own income tax return has been likened to a do-it-yourself mugging. It's no wonder that an estimated 17% of federal income tax filers cheat. That statistic doesn't include people like me who make inadvertent good-faith errors such as declaring three goldfish (complete with Social Security numbers) as dependents.

By the way, while doing my research on tax evasion I briefly became excited when I heard about a form you could file that allows you to stop paying income taxes altogether. Someone else even fills it out for you. Unfortunately, it's called a Death Certificate, and not many of you reading this qualify (or want to).

Creativity is seldom rewarded on tax returns, but if you are really determined to give it a try, I recommend that you start small with your

Iowa tax form instead of the federal one – the prison term is probably less lengthy.

Despite what you may think, you are probably already a tax cheat. I happen to know all about that sweater you bought at Mall of America when you went to visit your sister in Minneapolis last Christmas. Although Minnesota may not charge sales tax on clothing, as soon as you crossed the border back into Iowa you were required to pay a “Consumer’s Use Tax” equal to the Iowa state sales tax. No kidding.

In fact, almost every Internet or mail-order item you buy on which the seller does not collect and remit Iowa state sales tax, you are required to voluntarily (ha-ha) submit the tax on it when you pay your state income tax. Yes, that includes those colorful marital aids that I suspect you are buying on the Home Shopping Network at 2 a.m.

Not feeling so smug now, Mr. or Ms. Tax Cheat? If you’re going to continue to violate Iowa law like this you had better keep it to yourself, or a public-minded citizen like me might rat you out to the tax fraud hotline of the Iowa Department of Revenue and Finance for a big (I hope) reward.

Fortunately for you, all will be forgiven on April 30th if you can see your way clear to submit a separate check to the state for the appropriate amount along with your state tax return. As a bonus, you might also then qualify for the Iowa Award – our state’s highest citizen honor – for being the first person ever to voluntarily remit any money in compliance with this obscure regulation.

For the record, I strongly advise you to remit all taxes in an accurate and timely manner. Fortunately for me (are you listening, Iowa Revenue Department?), I haven’t made any purchases that might trigger the Consumer’s Use Tax, especially early in the morning from the Home Shopping Network, and even if I had, they weren’t the right size and I’ll be sending them back tomorrow.