

Lost change: No money sense

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 6, 2003](#) issue

Recent findings have reopened arguments concerning when humans arrived in our hemisphere. Most believe that our ancestors came from Asia, either across the Bering Straits or, thanks to Ice Age vagaries, across “Beringia,” a temporary isthmus. Some say it was about 10,000 years ago, while others set it at about 30,000. For present purposes, I am going to move that estimate back to 32,200 years.

Suppose the first stray who reached our hemisphere that long ago brought along a slingshot pebble. Adjust the value of that pebble for inflation, and picture it being the equivalent of today’s dollar. Conceive of it as worth a constant dollar from back then until now.

Suppose, further, that this hunter and his descendants gave you and your ancestors one of these “dollars” every second, night and day, week-around, year-around, century-around and millennium-around. That adds up in 32,200 years to 1 trillion 100 billion dollars. What can you buy with \$1,100,000,000,000?

If I am calculating correctly and if “Harper’s Index” (*Harper’s*, August) is accurately reporting data from the U.S. Department of Defense, that sum is the “amount the Defense Department has lost track of, according to a 2000 report by its inspector general.” Note that the inspector general is not accounting for how much the Defense Department has spent but how much it lost track of. No doubt the DOD people have the same trouble the rest of us do keeping track of toll-booth coins in the various niches of their autos, or the pin money stashed in pockets and purses. It is also possible that some department accountants are no better at mathematics than I, and so made mistakes. Still, \$1,100,000,000,000 is a lot to lose.

How does this lost-track-of amount compare to what other nations spend for their militaries? The next line in the “Harper’s Index” quotes the International Institute for Strategic Studies: “Ratio of this amount to the rest of the world’s military budgets combined: 2:1.”

Suppose the DOD and the military branches had been better stewards. Suppose that the government then had spend even one-tenth of the military's lost amount for social services, education, health care, environmental protection and remedies for poverty. Wouldn't this have made an enormous difference in our welfare? But that's the wrong question to ask. The "conservatives" who now prevail in politics and religion have made very clear that they want the government entirely out of social services, education, health care, environmental protection and remedies for poverty. The private sector alone, we hear, is supposed to take care of these. The churches are expected to be in the front line of such nongovernmental financial support of valid causes and suffering people.

How are the private citizens, including churchpeople, doing with that role? Again we consult "Harper's Index," which, quoting the Barna Report, gives an indicator: "Percentage change since last year in the number of U.S. Christian adults who tithe at least 10 percent of their income: -62." (I have to throw away my old button with the slogan "I have never met an ex-tither.")

The churches ought to be training a generation of experts who could relate the data of the financial world to the stewardship messages of the prophetic world. "Harper's Index" provides data on the success of one very rare curricular offering on this front. "Number of students who have earned Emory University's joint M.B.A./divinity degree since it was first offered in 1990: 3."