



“My Two Cents’ Worth”

by Ed Reiter



HEADS YOU LOSE, TAILS YOU LOSE

Two heads are better than one, so they say—but two heads plus two tails might turn out to be a case of subtraction by addition.

That’s what I fear would happen if Congress adopted the ill-conceived and clumsily named American Liberty Coinage Program and Deficit Reduction Act recently introduced by a Kentucky congressman named Garland “Andy” Barr.

Under Barr’s proposal, the U.S. Mint would issue new dimes, quarters and half dollars bearing allegorical representations of American Liberty on the obverse. The reverse designs would be based on themes from one of five categories: an American bald eagle; fasces emblematic of civil governance; the torch of knowledge; something symbolic of the Union; or one or more of the American values and attributes of freedom, independence, peace, strength, equality, democracy and justice.

That’s quite a mouthful—but to this point, the plan seems fairly harmless and even appears to offer a way to remove the dead presidents from at least some of our coins. Their presence—and permanence—has blocked improvements in U.S. coins’ aesthetic appeal for generations and been a source of vexation for Americans who long for beauty, not just utility, in their coins.

It turns out, however, that Barr has no intention of removing dead presidents from our coins. He wants the Mint to keep making Roosevelt dimes, Washington quarters and Kennedy half dollars *in addition* to the three new Liberty-themed coins. In other words, once the program was fully implemented, we’d have two different dimes, quarters and halves every year.

That’s madness.

There have been cases when multiple designs appeared on coins of the same denomination and same composition during a single year—almost all involving transitions where an old design was being replaced by a new one. That happened, for example, with cents in 1909, dimes and quarters in 1916, silver dollars in 1921 and nickels in 1938. It happened with large cents in 1793, when the Mint issued coins of that denomination in *three* different versions before it finally settled on the Liberty Cap design.

The Mint made two different kinds of three-cent pieces (silver and nickel) from



Congressman Barr wants to bring Liberty back to coins.

1865 to 1873 and two different coins with a face value of five cents (the half dime and nickel) from 1866 to 1873.

But in both those instances, the coins were dissimilar in composition *and* in size.

I can think of just one precedent for simultaneous multi-year production of two U.S. coins of the same face value and same metallic content but wholly differ-

ent designs: the current presidential and Native American dollars. But both those coins have been dismal failures and aren’t even being made for general distribution anymore. So why would anyone look to those as a source of inspiration?

Half dollars, too, aren’t being made for circulation and haven’t been since 2001—so new Liberty halves almost surely would play no meaningful role in the nation’s commerce. Like the current Kennedy halves and both of the mini-dollar coins, they would simply fill holes in the Mint’s special sets and give it added fodder for other premium products such as rolls and mini-bags, which it sells to collectors at hefty markups.

Hmmmm ... do you suppose those markups might be the real point of Congressman Barr’s legislation? By George (and FDR and JFK), I think we’ve got it! The “Deficit Reduction” in the name of the bill would be borne, to a great extent, by the nation’s coin hobbyists in the form of added spending on extraneous overpriced products from the Mint. The rest of the “reduction” presumably would result from increased seigniorage on dimes and quarters, the only truly circulating coins covered by the bill—though I, for one, question whether total demand for these would be much higher.

I doubt whether the three new coins would generate nearly as much revenue as the congressman apparently envisions, from either added sales or extra seigniorage. Collectors have grown weary of the Mint’s constant barrage of “special” coins, as evidenced by their sharply reduced interest in the ill-named “America the Beautiful” quarters. Unlike the 50-state quarters, these coins have also failed to catch on with the general public, as suggested by their much lower mintage levels.

Maybe the bill needs a new name: The Giving the Government Liberty to Reduce Collectors’ Bank Balance Act. ☹

STACK’S BOWERS