

The Virtue of Zero: Queensboro Bridge Quells Political Avarice

Carl V. Rabstejnek, P.E., M.B.A., Ph.D.

This is not a new story for its moral goes back to an ancient Arab proverb about not letting a camel get his nose under the tent. To wit, over a lifetime of over 70 years, I have observed the frustration of New York City politicians as they repeatedly [failed to put a toll on East River bridges](#) from the boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn to Manhattan.

The Queensboro Bridge is among the latest (1909) of the four major cross-river bridges that began with the Brooklyn (1883), followed by the Williamsburg (1903) and Manhattan (also 1909) spans. To provide an example more relatable than Arabian folklore, camels, cold desert nights, and warm tents, this bridge metaphor is provided.

When it opened, the Queensboro Bridge had a 10¢ automobile toll. By 1911, Mayor [William Jay Gaynor](#) had [removed the fee](#). I have included his portrait at the top of the next column to pay tribute this *rare* fee-cutting species among politicians. In a sense, he was a unique public servant who pushed the camel's nose out of the tent.

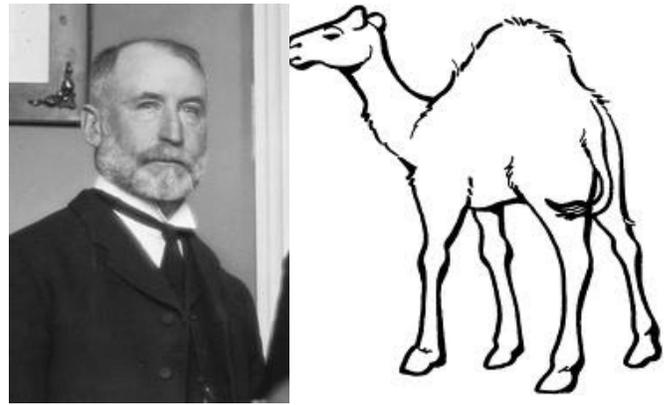
The Camel Fable

There are several versions to the [“never let a camel get his nose under the tent” story](#). Basically, it involves an Arab traveler settling down for a cold night on the desert and his camel asking for permission to put his nose under his master's warmer tent. This incrementally progresses to head, shoulder, forefeet, hindquarter, and then whole body. Eventually the camel occupies the tent and the Arab is evicted. Each step in the process makes logical and emotional sense — minuscule requests of little sacrifice.

[Other metaphors](#) and idioms exist, such as “foot in the door,” “slippery slope,” “the thin end of the wedge,” “domino effect,” “give an inch and they'll take a mile.” These are similar and used in diverse situations but the comparison is often abstract. The Queensboro Bridge metaphor is offered because contemporary and concrete comparative data can be used to quantitatively illustrate the camel fable with real money numbers. As there are other interborough bridges that serve an equivalent function, their toll history can realistically be compared. The following toll's data, from 1971 to 2005, is extracted from a [2005 report](#) for a city government agency.

1971	\$0.25	1984	\$1.50	1996	\$3.50
1972	\$0.50	1986	\$1.75	2003	\$4.00
1975	\$0.75	1987	\$2.00	2005	\$4.50
1980	\$1.00	1989	\$2.50
1982	\$1.25	1993	\$3.00	2011	\$6.50

The data shows the continually increasing toll fees on New York City interborough bridges while the four East River bridges remain at zero (0). While there was also considerable resistance to raising tolls, it is apparent that *politicians are more successful increasing than initiating*.



William Jay Gaynor Snubs the Camel

Change in the Nature of Arguments

Once the initial chink in the defense occurs the nature of arguments changes from moral and philosophical to economic. I am reminded of the [old “proposition” joke](#), variously attributed to Winston Churchill or George Bernard Shaw and others, about asking would *the lady* sleep with him for millions; getting a yes, he changes the offer to a pittance. When she indignantly replies “No! What do you think I am?” The *nobleman* replies that has been established and they are now haggling over price.

I submit that once a toll is applied, no matter how small, the amount will be incrementally increased. It becomes difficult to argue against a 25¢ (or dollar) increase when there is so much collective need, best gratified by the political class, which is parasitic.

Recently, advocates for a toll have changed tack and proposed a substantial initial toll for East River bridges. Their argument, that is attracting public support in some polls, is an equitable reduction in fees for other bridges and tunnels. Surprisingly, many people still believe in politicians' promises.

Lessons for the “Defensive” Negotiator

Not every difference in life should be defended as strongly as the absence of East River bridges tolls. Good parents judiciously yield privileges to each child when he or she is able to take on more responsibility. I am not a strong believer in [birth-order theory](#) but realize latter-born children may separate more quickly than a first-born child. Precedent tempers their argument, much like the several other interborough bridges tolls are pointed to as rationalization for initiating the Queensboro Bridge toll.

Thus, this is not an essay on standing one's ground on all matters. Good parents realize that by incremental yielding they are supporting separation and individuation necessary for adulthood, a desirable objective for offspring to stand on their own two feet. *Independence* is the goal! Politicians, on the other hand, become more *dependent* and need to extract more for *opposite* reasons.

In one case individual freedom is enhanced and in the other case relinquished and we must know the difference.