

The GREAT DEPRESSION

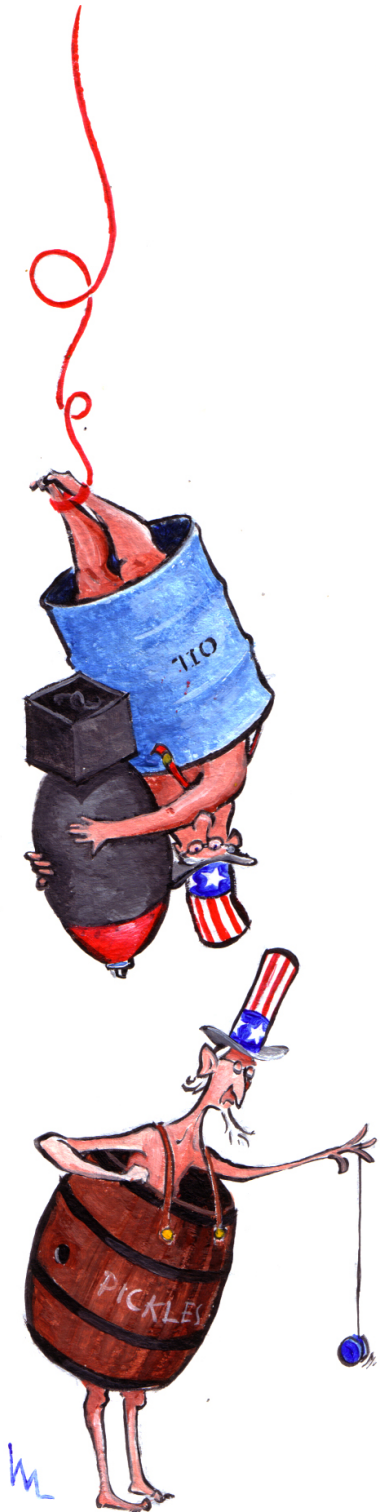
vs.

the X-treme Recession

During the past ten days, stock exchanges around the world have mapped new territory of dizzying economic contours. The Dow Jones Industrial Average, starting from a five-year low below 8000 points (off nearly forty-five percent from its all-time high a year earlier), sprang back over thirteen hundred points early last week before giving most of that back again. This marks the beginning of a period of market oscillation which in simpler times might have been compared to the up-and-down movement of a yo-yo. You remember the yo-yo, that ancient toy/weapon popularized in 1929 by Donald F. Duncan Sr., creator of the Good Humor Man and parking meters.

As a metaphor, the yo-yo--imminent threat to slow-witted birds, pets, vases and the occasional forehead--doesn't quite capture the peril in which we now find ourselves. Perhaps a better model might be the more recent, more extreme recreation of bungee jumping off a bridge. Bungee jumping while hugging a bomb, perhaps. Add a busy freeway beneath the bridge and you have a much closer likeness to our current circumstances. For all the recent commentary equating our country in the 1930s to today, little attention has been paid to the enormous gulf that has opened up in America's self-reliance over the course of three generations of technological innovation. In this department we might as well be comparing apples to, well, some super-sized, caffeinated, hydrogenated, fat-saturated, high-fructose-corn-syrup-suffused apple food substitute.

To cite some examples of our current resiliency gap let's go back to the yo-yo. In the long continuum of idle pastimes, the yo-yo supplanted rolling barrel hoops down the sidewalk with a stick. And not a moment too soon, as the hoop--along with the rest of the barrel--became a fashion option for Americans who lost everything (clothing included) in the crash. The image of the impoverished, barrel-clad U.S. citizen was created by Will B. Johnstone, cartoonist for the New York World, who went on to write stage and screenplays for the Marx Brothers. But I digress.



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The yo-yo had two functioning parts and was simple to repair: if the string broke, you replaced it. In the 1930s there was string *everywhere*. Today, the yo-yo has been replaced by an impenetrable plastic box of microcircuitry which has little utility unless hooked up to a power source, a wand of some sort and a large plasma video display. One bent connector pin, one blown resistor or any of a number of other interruptions to its complex galaxy of technology, and you have yourself a very sleek, very expensive paperweight.

Transportation, a fundament of any market economy, has delivered our 21st-century culture far out on an economic limb. Seventy-five years ago, if something went wrong with the carburetor engine on your car, you could probably repair it with a couple of hand tools and stuff lying around the house. Worse case scenario, you could always borrow your neighbor's mule and cart. Today, if a fuel sensor goes berserk on your SUV and you lack a sufficient bank balance to tow it to the shop and have a replacement part shipped from the other side of the planet to be installed by someone with an expensive health insurance policy that needs to be paid for. . . Just keep in mind that even a small SUV up on blocks can comfortably accommodate five-to-eight laying hens.

Likewise, our means of gathering information may have stretched far beyond our capacity to access it in dire economic times. The preferred medium of information in the 1930s, back ink on newsprint, was cheap and economical when stacked against our society's unhealthy addiction to the digitized content of cable TV and internet. Starved for readers, newspapers today are shriveling up and blowing away. This is doubly sad for not only do we lose independent sources of news, we also lose great insulation. Long before the age of recycling, newspapers layered between bed sheets guaranteed warmth all winter long. By contrast, a laptop battery burns hot enough to bake biscuits but lasts about two hours once the electricity gets shut off.

And while we're on the topic of biscuits, now might be an excellent time to reacquaint yourself with your grandmother's cookbooks, buried beneath all those take-out menus. While you're at it, reintroduce yourself to those things at the back of your freezer and pantry shelves, behind the frozen entrees and instant cocoa packets. They are called ingredients.

I could go on, but you get the picture. The good news here is that much of our resiliency gap can be closed by the simple application of common sense sparked by economic incentive. Enchanted by the wizardry of marketing, we have become a culture accustomed to driving our enormous cars two miles to the gym to spend half an hour on a treadmill, a culture that plugs our open windows with machines that heat up the outside almost as fast as they cool the inside.

While there is no way to guess how long or how deep our current recession will be, there is no time like the present to start relearning some of the simple homey survival skills of past generations. So unplug your iPod, go up to the attic and find great-grandpa's ukulele and let's sing us out:

*Just around the corner,
There s a rainbow in the sky.
So let s have another cup of coffee,
And Let s have another piece of pie.*

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