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2009: YEAR IN REVIEW

The man and the hour have met. —William Yancey

REVIVING A 6,000 POUND ELEPHANT: THE U.S. ECONOMY—Our current economy is a three-ton elephant with four bad limbs. Like the fierce earthquake and tsunami that devastated Chile and the deadly mudslide that devastated the villages in Uganda, our troubled economy continues to teeter on the brink of a precipice. We are still slipping, although the rate has slowed. At the local, state, and national levels, policymakers continue to debate over the best course of action to solve our economic problems, while people continue to be laid off. In the state of Georgia, things simply do not look too peachy at the moment. Teaching positions continue to be sliced, transportation costs cut, and federal aid reduced. Potholes and cracks on the streets are becoming increasingly prevalent, while construction and road projects are left abandoned or slow to a crawl. The sounds of gunshots are on the rise while the number of policemen on patrol is on the decline. Full recovery anytime soon will be difficult, if not impossible, given our limited funds.

Virtually all areas of our economy are struggling to recover. The households, resource markets, firms, and markets for goods and services sectors are still trying to stem the flow of blood. Production, consumption, and investment are picking up pace; but any good faith effort to nurture this gigantic beast of an economy back to health and get it moving full speed again requires not only great insight and ingenuity, but also a deep understanding of how our cash-strapped government operates; how the disillusioned consumers behave; and how the unstoppable exogenous forces such as wars, natural disasters, and civil and political disruptions continue to collectively collide and shape the economic landscape. So far, the White House has invested billions of dollars in public subsidies for green-energy projects to jolt the economy back to life. But where do these billions come from? The answer is, from overseas.

In his magnum opus, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, John Maynard Keynes analyzed the workings of national economies in order to explain how recessions turn into depressions. His analysis of the business cycle shaped the way economists today think and tackle complex problems on the national and global scales. One macroeconomics idea, indirectly connected to Keynes' business cycle analysis, involves using central banks to stabilize a wobbling business cycle. The concept of centralized banking existed long before Keynes released his publication in 1936. The First Bank of the United States, for example, planned by Alexander Hamilton, was created in 1791 to generate wealth. But what Mr. Hamilton did not foresee or anticipate was that public and political distrust would eventually play a critical role in transforming the centralized banking concept into a powerful machine known to us today as the Federal Reserve System. The Fed, created in 1913, plays an integral role in supplying money and credit in our economy by making periodic adjustments in interest rates. Despite its tremendous power to shape the economy, the Fed can do only so much if other dynamic forces fail to cooperate—forces such as our economic outlook and job security, two factors that play essential parts in altering our spending habits.

Economics 101 does not teach us what to do if we average hardworking Americans are earning less, spending more, and incurring mountains of debt. Are we supposed to take on more loans, work overtime, or hope things will simply improve by themselves? What if there are no jobs to be found? What if the bank or our friends and family refuse to lend us money? Well, we could declare bankruptcy and start over, or we could come up with some creative schemes that will bring us new wealth. Or, we could ask the government for help. But what if the government is also tight with money? Let's face the facts. We all know that it takes money to make money. To open up an opportunity requires a down payment. The final payoff from this down payment, at worst, may not be realized. If that is the case, every aspect on our home front will be affected. Any policy we impose on ourselves, or any policy government imposes on us, whether cutting up credit cards or reducing interest rates and passing new banking, tax, or labor laws, holds the potential of creating unanticipated consequences. A fortuneteller who says that he can predict the exact future is a fool, and an economist or stockbroker who claims that he can calculate the exact outcome of tomorrow's stock market is a liar. Forecasts and predictions are an inexact science. That is why we refer to them by those names.

In 2010, despite the slight economic upturn as a result of the billions that have been poured into the economy, the future still looks gloomy. The fact remains that jobs are still being lost. Our grander vision to wage war and save the world from natural or human made disasters, whether with good or bad intentions, adds to our budgetary crisis. We are simply spending money that we don't have. If this trend continues and tomorrow's bad weather prevents the trees that we have planted from bearing fruit, we all will be in for a wild ride. If and when that day comes, the limping elephant will be engulfed by the approaching storm.

That is the ugly truth.

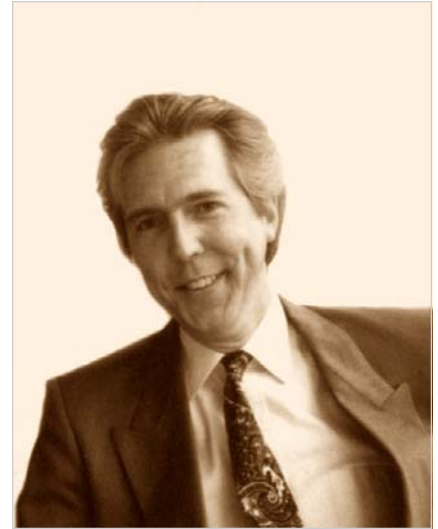


RICHARD QUAN
Managing Editor

ECONOMIC RECOVERY—Like many Americans, if not most, I have no head for business or money. I have a low amount of credit card debt, which I'm told is good because it shows fiscal responsibility; last summer I leased a new car and my credit rating was good enough that I wasn't turned down. I balance my checkbook weekly, save a few dollars, and have enough left over to indulge in a few non-essentials like cigars and mid-grade scotch.

I read recently that total U.S. consumer credit rose \$4.96 billion in January, its first rise in a year and the largest for any month since mid-2008. Good news, right? Good enough to make many of us think the worst is over, that by the end of the year it will be business as usual in America, and that we'll soon be enjoying unprecedented prosperity.

Yet you don't need a head for business or economics to read between the lines of the numbers I uncovered. Read the sobering statistics in *Economic Recovery: Is the Worst Really Behind Us?*



J. Conrad Guest
Contributing Editor

"I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance in London, that a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled..."

—Jonathan Swift, 1729

WHEN SWIFT WROTE *A Modest Proposal*, suggesting the Irish solve their economic problems by eating their own children, little did he realize, years later, that we Americans would embrace his advice more heartily than he could have ever imagined. We've updated the process, in order to make our children less aware their little lives are being systematically cannibalized, but the end result is the same.

Our feeding process is akin to Tarantula Hawk larvae: we feed off of our victims while keeping them alive in the hope they will live long enough to continue providing fresh nourishment and won't notice we've sucked them completely dry until well after we're gone.

Some predict that the world's oil supplies will dry up in as little as 30 years. About that same time others claim global warming will raise the temperature of the planet enough to have melted most of the polar ice, disrupted the ocean's currents, and altered Earth's weather patterns, turning our breadbaskets into deserts and coastlands into snorkeling spots. Most rainforests will be cleared by then, and the oceans will be fished out. Dodo birds made easy meals way back when, so I'm told; renewable resources are only renewable if there is something left over to renew.

The social dieticians who wrote this hearty menu keep reminding us that to abandon our cannibalistic child-eating process would irreparably disrupt the economy. They are right. The huge economic boom of the 80's and 90's was a direct result of super-sizing our baby-munching meals. Credit card debt, government debt, and borrow-and-spend policies are what have allowed us to enjoy our Hummers, McMansions, designer shoes, Grande Frappuccinos, and type-2 diabetes. Indeed, our offspring's future is just another credit card too, isn't it, and the bills won't come due in time for us to have to pay, so why worry?

Eat, drink and be merry, the Good Book says, for tomorrow we die. Even God is on our side.

And we shouldn't let this current economic downturn or ever-dwindling world resources put us on a diet, lest our children begin to recover from our gnawing on them long enough to gain the strength to fight back, for the very fact that this is not sustainable is also the very reason we must continue on, full-bore. This process is dependent on resources-yet-to-be-created being fully consumed *before* they are truly real. That way, no one notices they are eaten up because they aren't really there yet to begin with. It is a most elegant, abstract form of cannibalism. If we stop now, we'll lose all our cool stuff, have to downsize, to go without things, to die without the most toys. And the main thing we would have to stop doing is having so many kids, to downsize and reverse world population to more sustainable levels, but that

would be like killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Who would we eat then?

Sure, when the current crop of kids reach my age—if they live that long—they may finally grow wise to us having already eaten them alive, but there's not much they'll be able to do about it by then. They'll undoubtedly pout and complain and do what kids *always* do: blame their parents for all their problems. But the truth is our kids should thank us, because, after all, if we had acted more responsibly toward our planet, way back now, they might have never been born.



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Economic Recovery: Is The Worst Really Behind Us? by J. Conrad Guest

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LIKE MANY AMERICANS, if not most, I have no head for business or money. I have a low amount of credit card debt, which I'm told is good because it shows fiscal responsibility; last summer I leased a new car and my credit rating was good enough that I wasn't turned down. I balance my checkbook weekly, save a few dollars, and have enough left over to indulge in a few non-essentials like cigars and mid-grade scotch.

According to the Federal Reserve, total U.S. consumer credit rose \$4.96 billion in January, its first rise in a year and the largest for any month since mid-2008, a sign they say proves that the U.S. economic recovery is on track. Good news, right? Good enough to make many Americans think the worst is over, that by the end of the year it will be business as usual in America, and that we'll soon be enjoying unprecedented prosperity.

Hold on. According to Michael Snyder, who writes for *Business Insider*, the U.S. will *never* fully recover from the current crisis. According to Snyder, a second wave of mortgage defaults is imminent. He claims a mountain of mortgages is due to reset this year, resulting in millions more people being unable to pay their mortgages.

I read recently that the number of bank failures in the U.S. so far this year is 26. This, following the 140 brought down last year by growing loan defaults and the recession. Do the math: 2010 is on a pace to see a total 156 failures.

Furthermore, the Federal Housing Administration recently announced plans to increase the amount of up-front cash paid by new borrowers and to require higher down payments from those with the poorest credit. Tighter standards means that fewer people will qualify for loans; fewer *qualified* buyers will result in fewer buyers, and fewer buyers means that home prices can be expected to drop even more.

On the job front, as of December 2009, 6,130,000 U.S. workers had been unemployed for 27 weeks or more, the most since the U.S. government began tracking this statistic in 1948 (this number does not include the nearly 1,000,000 discouraged workers *not* counted as part of the labor force because they have given up looking for employment). When you consider this number is more than double the 2,612,000 U.S. workers who were unemployed for a similar length of time in December 2008, one can see the future is not so bright.

Recession or depression? Consider that some regions of the country are virtually in a state of depression. The mayor of Detroit estimates that the actual unemployment rate in Motown is around 50 percent.

For decades, Washington has pushed for a global economy, claiming it would be good for the country. Yet U.S. workers must now compete with workers the world over, while corporations can pursue the cheapest labor available anywhere on the planet. According to Princeton University economist Alan S. Blinder, 22 to 29 percent of all *current* U.S. jobs will be off-shorable within two decades.

Throw into the mix that 25 state unemployment insurance funds have gone broke and the Department of Labor estimates

that 15 more state unemployment funds will likely go broke within two years; that 37 million Americans currently receive food stamps, with the program expanding at the rate of about 20,000 a day; that 1.41 million Americans filed for personal bankruptcy in 2009, a 32 percent increase over 2008; that nearly all pension funds, private and public alike, are massively underfunded; that with millions of Baby Boomers approaching retirement and with Social Security and Medicare expenses out of control, these retirees will likely never see what they are owed; and that the total federal debt has increased by 50 percent since 2006 to \$12.3 trillion, and that in February Democrats proposed borrowing an *additional* \$2 trillion to pay its bills.

With these statistics, you don't need a head for business or economics to see no light at the end of the tunnel.



J. CONRAD GUEST is the author of *Backstop: A Baseball Love Story in Nine Innings* and *January's Paradigm*. His fiction and essays appear in various online and print publications, including *Cezanne's Carrot*, *Saucy Vox*, *River Walk Journal*, *63 Channels*, *The Writers Post Journal*, *Red-bridge Review*, and *Blood and Thunder: Musings on the Art of Medicine*. He is also the co-founder of *The Smoking Poet*. (Photo courtesy of Sommerville Photographie).

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A caged bird.
That's who she is,
Within those steel bars she makes her home.
Her wings are restricted.
She speaks but rarely is she heard.
She is a bird with no way to spread her wings.
Can you people not see that she must be freed?
...I guess not.
Sure, she has food.
She has water.
She even has fresh air but it is not enough to satisfy her thirst.
That little bird can taste freedom each time she is let out...
But...soon, all too soon she is locked away again.
A caged bird.
That's who she is.
A caged bird who wishes to be heard.
A caged bird who needs to fly free.
Steel bars? This is what you have made her life into!
She is restricted in flight...like a kite on a string...
She has nowhere to go but round and round.
Please!
Someone!
Anyone!
Help her! Hear her pitiful cries! Please!
Let her go! Set her free before its too late!
But, wait.
A way out.
She takes flight, soaring for that chance,
Sweet freedom!
*slam!*No.
She's too late...
Steel doors slam shut on her.
She hits them and falls...
From where she lays, a crumpled mess,
She peers up through the bars and sees the world,
So big in her eyes, laughing and mocking her.
She lays in defeat, nursing a broken wing,
"I guess I'll always be a caged bird," she whispers, "That's who I am and will be until I am set free..."
A caged bird, yes, that is her, her life, in that tiny
prison...where you put her, for all the world to see & laugh at...



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I THOUGHT OF AN OLD FRIEND a few days back; no reason, but a barrage of thoughts entered my head. It seemed so real. Like warning bells. Something feels very surreal when you hear the news. An avoidable death, self inflicted, no warning whatsoever. What goes through the mind in those last desperate moments? Could it be the last few days, or is it cumulative months and years? *I can remember the days past of fun, friendship, laughter, so much to live for. Something happened, and I can't quite put the pieces together.*

Life has a way of wearing down the spirit, a heartbreak at a time, a disappointment here, job loss there. A relationship that pulls every breath of life out of you, or so it seems. We don't need one catastrophic event to pull our love for life down; on the contrary, it's much easier to slowly weave its way downward, one disillusionment at a time. It's like waking up one day after straying, over time, from your true beliefs and lifelong passions. *How did I get here? How did I get this far away from home? Where are the fences I depended on for so long, to keep me on the right path? Disillusionment: To lose naïve faith and trust. Desperation: loss of hope and surrender to despair; a state of hopelessness leading to rashness (Webster's)*

Death seems an easy option sometimes, an ending to a period of suffering that seems destined to go on forever. The anguish, however, doesn't end there. How many other victims are yet to surface following a suicide? The family must somehow cope with the loss, and questions that will always remain unanswered. A mother affects generations to come, for good or for bad. Fathers do as well, but a mother's love is so precious and heartfelt. The touch of a mom's love on her child passes to the next generation, through what is passed down. How can a child cope with the loss? Was it selfishness, or something deeply rooted that reached a culmination before anyone saw it approaching?

It takes little time to pull the trigger, slash the wrist, whatever the method of choice. Sadly, if we could somehow require every suicide victim to have a holding period of twenty four hours...time to think it over; look in to those kind, caring eyes of a loving parent, spouse, or child; talk to a friend who really cares, *if only they knew*; wait and find out his/her worst fears would not have really have come to pass...I wonder how many times it would not happen. Those that throw out hints are begging for help and attention; the ones that are full of despair leave no clues before or after, they only leave unreciprocated questions.

Somehow a romanticized view has emerged; *imagine the funeral, so beautiful with the flowers. The words, oh my, everyone misses me so, if things could have only been different. It will be okay. I'm free now, no more pain. I love you too.* What a tragedy, to believe such a notion. The grieving will be about getting beyond the anger. *How could he do this to his family? What will they do? I guess he didn't care about them at all. Why did she not care enough to be there when her girls receive their diplomas down the road? When they walk down the aisle on perhaps the biggest day of their lives, their wedding day?*

How could she not care? What an idiot, look at what he's done to his parents; they both loved him unconditionally. Why didn't he talk to someone? No one feels sorry for him.

Perhaps she did care, but let the perfect storm brew in her life, unattended. Life can reach a point where you see no way out, whether it's financial problems, a relationship, health issues, or a bevy of smaller things that lead up to a cataclysmic event.

Can't live without him, but after you're gone, he'll find someone else. *I'll never get out of this financial mess.* Others have, through time and discipline. *I'm just so tired. I wish it would all end...* Without faith and hope, any one can reach this place, and not have an answer. Those that choose to live life on the wheel of fortune, scattering the way of the wind, have nothing tangible to hold on to during their lowest point. Many of us have had fleeting thoughts in our periods of darkness that remain locked away in a secret chamber somewhere, deep within the recesses of our mind, inactive, yet unresolved. I have thought from time to time how much easier it would be to let a person enter my mind for a moment, to understand how I feel or think about them, to understand how I see the world, through my eyes. But I wonder if my friend would somehow steer into that hidden, locked chamber, seeing the inner parts that aren't to be revealed, ever. The fleeting thoughts that were subdued, the mistakes that we sometimes have trouble forgiving ourselves for. The little things that can add up to a big thing over time, if allowed to take root and grow.

Everyone needs that special place to go during their trials and periods of desolation. For some it's a place of prayer; sometimes it's a close friend that not only understands, but can finish those tough sentences that you are struggling with, reaching for words. Time is also a good healer, if we only allow it to come to pass. Have you ever looked at someone precious to you, maybe a child, parent, or good friend, and flashed back to a crossroad in your life? Think of what you would have missed if your decision had led you down a different path. My personal wish is that if someone I am within arm's reach of ever arrives at such a low place in his or her life, he or she will ask for my help, if I can make a difference. Reach out to someone. Life is too precious. The seasons of life come and go, and spring always follows our winter time. A time for planting and renewal and hope.

Do they all feel alone?



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Prophecies And Socio Cultural Perspective by Sucheta Rawal

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IS THE WORLD GOING to end in 2012, like the Mayans calendar suggests, or is this heightened curiosity another Sci-fi theme for Hollywood to capitalize on?

Doomsday prophecies, a recurrent theme throughout history, remain a controversial topic. Modern astronomers have confirmed it is a scientific fact that a galactic alignment shall occur on December 21, 2012 but gave us no indication that it would lead to a global catastrophe. The Mayans calendar simply ended on this date but the Mayans never said that this would be the date when the world would come to an end. Yes, the polar caps are melting and the earth temperature is rising but the next ice age is definitely not two years out.

The Egyptians, Nostradamus, as well as world religions, have predicted disastrous calamities. However, just as the wonderful teachings of religions, spiritual leaders and prophets are sometimes lost in translation, I believe that is what is happening here as well. Based on my understanding, research and belief, the next few years mark "the end of the world as we know it" rather than an outright destruction of the planet itself.

The evolution of Earth as a planet and the life on it has been an ongoing phenomenon. We have been through the ice age, Stone Age, the dark period, agricultural revolution, industrialization, modernism, and so on. Whenever there were periods of extremity, a new equilibrium was always found. Eckhart Tolle, in his book "A New Earth" talks about the collective awakening of humankind that is taking place. He quotes the teaching of Buddhism and Christianity, which still apply to us after thousands of years.

We have reached a point in our society where things are out of balance. There is too much warfare, terrorism, greed, discrimination, hatred, selfishness, egoism, and excessive consumption. Humans have moved away from nature to live in metropolitan areas. We build large homes with little surrounding greenery. We are being wasteful. We transport fresh produce across continents and eat preserved food. We have secluded ourselves from society and become quite comfortable living alone yet seek for constant contact with others through various technologies. We are driven by other's perceptions of us rather than being genuine to ourselves, strive to achieve success through materialistic things, and horde for powers. We are becoming so absorbed with our physical forms and our egos that we forget that it is our souls that drive our living force. Recognizing our harmful life behaviors present us with the opportunity to shift back to equilibrium through spiritual awakening.

The spiritual transition is already starting to take place, not only within individuals, but also in countries, economies, climates, societies, and corporations. In the next issue, we will explore what changes are occurring in each of these areas and what this new world would look like.



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