The Current Recession in Perspective

Address by

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I am glad to meet with this distinguished group of business and financial journalists in a leisurely setting. As a policymaker, I feel I have much in common with the members of your profession. Both you and I must be alert to every twist and nuance of the changing economic scene. Both you and I must keep busy searching the business skies for some clues to the economic future. I find this aspect of my work exciting and intriguing, as I am sure you do. But it does involve a certain risk for both of us.

Sharing—as we do—the problem of continually meeting deadlines, we are in danger of becoming so preoccupied with the very short run that we fail to see economic events in perspective. For that very reason, I have wanted to take advantage of your invitation, so that we might ponder together the historical developments which have brought our economy to its present condition. This is a large and highly important subject. I cannot hope to do full justice to it on the present occasion. Nevertheless, I shall make a start this evening.

As you are well aware, these past few years have been trying times for the American people. Not only have we lived through the agony of Vietnam and Watergate, but some of us have even begun to wonder whether our dream of full employment, a stable price level, and a rising standard of living for all our people is beyond fulfillment.

Early last year, economic expansion began to falter in our country, as it did in other countries around the world. At the same time, the pace of the inflation that had been building for more than a decade accelerated sharply further. As the year advanced, it became increasingly clear that our economy was moving into a recession.

During the past two quarters, the real gross national product has declined by 5 per cent, and the level of industrial production is now 12 or 13 per cent below last September. The unemployment rate has risen swiftly, and so also has the idle capacity in our major industries. The decline in business activity since last fall has been the steepest of the post-war period, and yet the advance of the price level—while considerably slower than last year—is continuing at a disconcerting pace.

No business-cycle movement can be comprehended solely in terms of the events that occur within that cycle or the one preceding it. The economic currents of today are heavily influenced by longer-range developments—such as changes in economic and financial institutions, the course of public policy, and the attitudes and work habits of people. By examining the historical background of recent economic troubles, we should be able to arrive at a better understanding of where we now are.

The current recession is best viewed, and I believe it will be so regarded by historians, as the culminating phase of a long economic cycle.

There have been numerous long cycles in the past —that is, units of experience combining two or more ordinary business cycles. One such long cycle ran its course from 1908 to 1921, another from 1921 to 1933. And if we go back to the nineteenth century, we encounter long cycles from 1879 to 1894 and from 1894 to 1908. These long cycles differ in innumerable ways from one another. But they also have some features in common—in particular, each culminates in an economic decline of more than average intensity.

The beginning of the long cycle that now appears to be approaching its natural end may be dated as early as 1958, but it is perhaps best to date its start in 1961. The upward movement of economic activity which began in that year was checked briefly in 1967 and interrupted more significantly in 1970. Although these interruptions were watched with concern and some anxiety by practicing economists and other interested citizens, they will be passed over lightly by economic historians concerned with large events.

The reason is not hard to see. Putting aside monthly and quarterly data, and looking only at annual figures, we find that total employment rose every year from 1961 through 1973. So also did disposable personal income and personal consumption expenditures—both viewed on a per capita basis, and in real terms. This sustained upward trend of the economy came to an end in 1974.

The successive phases of the long upswing from 1961 to 1974 provide a useful perspective on our current problems. Some years ago, in my work at the National Bureau of Economic Research, I observed a pattern in past long upswings—an initial stage that may be called the "industrial phase" followed by what is best described as the "speculative phase." The imbalances that develop in this latter phase lead inevitably to the final downturn. The events of the past 15 years conform rather closely to this pattern.

The period from 1961 through 1964 may be regarded as the industrial phase of the long upswing. Productivity grew rapidly—increasing in the private nonfarm sector at an annual rate of 3.6 per cent between the final quarters of 1960 and 1964, or well above the average rate of the preceding decade. Unit labor costs were then remarkably stable, and so too was the general price level. Real wages and profits rose strongly. During this period of sustained economic expansion, unemployment fell from about 7 per cent of the labor force to 5 per cent, while the rate of use of industrial capacity rose substantially.

The second—or speculative—phase of the long upswing began around 1965 and continued through much of 1974. This ten-year period was marked by a succession of major, interrelated, and partly overlapping speculative waves that in varying degrees gripped other leading industrial countries as well as the United States.

The first speculative movement involved corporate mergers and acquisitions. In the euphoria of what some commentators have called the "go-go" years, rapid growth of earnings per share of common stock became the overriding goal of many business managers. Other yardsticks of corporate performance—such as the rate of return on new investments—were neglected, and so too were the serious risks of increased leveraging of common stock.

The aggregate volume of large corporate acquisitions, which for some years had been running at about $2 billion per year, jumped to $3 billion in 1965, to $8 billion in 1967, to $12½ billion in 1968, and then tapered off. This was the great era of conglomerates, when a variety of unrelated businesses were brought together under a single corporate management. Entrepreneurs who displayed special skill in such maneuvers were hailed as financial geniuses—until their newly built empires began to crumble. Being preoccupied with corporate acquisitions and their conglomerate image, many businessmen lost sight of the traditional business objective of seeking larger profits through better technology, aggressive marketing, and improved management. The productivity of their businesses suffered, and so too did the nation's productivity.

The spectacular merger movement of the late 1960's was reinforced, and to a degree made possible, by the speculative movement that developed in the market for common stocks. The volume of trading on the New York Stock Exchange doubled between 1966 and 1971, and for a time trading volume on the American Exchange rose even faster. The prices of many stocks shot up with little regard to actual or potential earnings. During the two years 1967 and 1968, the average price of a share of common stock listed on the New York Exchange rose 40 per cent, while earnings per share of the listed companies rose less than 2 per cent. On the American Exchange, the average price per share rose during the same years more than 140 per cent on an earnings base that again was virtually unchanged.

Much of this speculative ardor came from a section of the mutual fund industry. For the new breed of "performance funds," long-term investment in the shares of established companies with proven earnings became an outmoded concept. In their quest for quick capital gains, these institutions displayed a penchant for risky investments and aggressive trading. In 1965, a typical mutual fund turned over about one-fifth of its common stock portfolio; by 1969, that fraction had risen to nearly one-half. As Wall Street then had it, the "smart money" went into issues of technologically-oriented firms or into corporate conglomerates—no matter how well or poorly they met the test of profitability.

Speculation in equities was cooled for a time by the stock market decline of 1969-1970, but then it resumed again and took on new forms. Money managers began to channel a preponderant part of their funds into the stocks of large and well-known firms—apparently with the thought that earnings of those companies were impervious to the vicissitudes of economic life. A huge disparity was thereby created between the price-earnings ratios of the "favored fifty" and those of other corporations. Share prices of these "favored" companies were, of course, especially hard hit in the subsequent shakeout of the stock market.

Speculation in common stocks was not confined to the United States. From the late 1960's until about 1973, nearly every major stock exchange in the world experienced a large run-up in share prices, only to be followed by a drastic decline. Indeed, speculation reached a more feverish pace in some countries than in the United States. On the Tokyo stock exchange, for example, both share prices and the trading volume actually doubled in the twelve months between January 1972 and January 1973, and then suffered a sharp reversal.

The third speculative wave that nourished the long upswing of our national economy occurred in the real estate market. Homebuilding fluctuated around a horizontal trend during the 1960's. The vacancy rate in rental housing was at a high level from 1960 to 1965, then fell steadily until the end of the decade, and thus helped pave the way for a new housing boom. Between January of 1970 and January of 1973, the volume of new housing starts doubled. Since then, homebuilding has plunged, and in some sections of the nation it has virtually come to a halt. Failures of construction firms and unemployment among construction workers have reached depression levels. These unhappy developments stem in large measure from the excesses of the housing boom that got under way in 1970.

Inflationary expectations clearly played a substantial role in bolstering the demand for houses. But the boom was fostered also by an array of governmental policies designed to stimulate activity in the housing sector. These governmental measures, however well-intentioned, gave little heed to basic supply conditions in the industry or to the underlying demand for housing.

In response to easy credit and Federal subsidies, merchant builders moved ahead energetically, put up one-family homes well ahead of demand, and thus permitted the inventory of unsold homes to double between 1970 and 1973. Speculative activity was even more intense in the multi-family sector—that is, in apartments built for renting, and particularly in condominiums and cooperatives, which accounted for a fourth of the completions of multi-family structures by the first half of 1974.

The boom in housing was financed by a huge expansion of mortgage credit and construction loans. Real estate investment trusts played an exceptionally large role in supplying high-risk construction loans for condominiums, recreational developments, and other speculative activities. The growth of real estate trusts was extraordinary by any yardstick. Their assets, amounting to less than $700 million in 1968, soared to upwards of $20 billion by 1973. Unsound practices accompanied this rapid growth and, as a result, many real estate trusts now face difficult financial problems.

The speculative boom in real estate was not confined to residential structures. It extended to speculation in land, to widespread building of shopping centers, and to construction of office buildings. By 1972, the vacancy rate in office buildings reached 13 per cent, but this type of construction still kept climbing.

The real estate boom in the United States during the early 1970's had its parallel in other countries. Speculation in land and properties became rampant in the United Kingdom. In 1972 alone, new house prices rose 47 per cent on the average. The amount of credit absorbed in real estate ventures rose so rapidly that the Bank of England felt forced to place special controls on bank lending for such purposes. And in Germany, the boom in residential construction during 1971-73 left an inventory of about a quarter million unsold units—more than a third of a peak year's output—that now overhang the market.

It is in the nature of speculative movements to spread from one country or market to another. Just as the speculative wave in real estate was beginning to taper off in 1973, a new wave of speculation got under way—this time in inventories. That was the fourth and final speculative episode of the long economic upswing from 1961 to 1974. It involved massive stocking up of raw materials, machinery, parts, and other supplies in the United States and in other industrial countries.

The inventory speculation of 1973 and 1974 was the outgrowth of a boom in business activity that had raised its head by 1972 in virtually every industrial country of the world. The synchronism of economic expansion in these countries was partly coincidental, but the expansion that stemmed from ordinary business-cycle developments was reinforced by the adoption of stimulative economic policies almost everywhere. As a result, production increased rapidly around the world, and led to a burgeoning demand for raw materials, machine tools, component parts, and capital equipment—goods for which our country is a major source of supply. The pressure of rising world demand was reinforced in our markets by the devaluation of the dollar, which greatly improved our competitive position in international trade.

By the beginning of 1973, as business firms attempted to meet intense demands from both domestic and foreign customers, serious bottlenecks and shortages had begun to develop in numerous industries—especially those producing steel, non-ferrous metals, paper, chemicals, and other raw materials. In this environment of scarcities, the rise in prices of industrial commodities quickened both here and abroad. The dramatic advance of food prices in 1973, and later in energy prices, greatly compounded the worldwide inflationary problem. In our country, these price pressures were suppressed for a time by price and wage controls, but the general price level exploded when controls were phased out in late 1973 and early 1974.

One of the unfortunate consequences of inflation is that it masks underlying economic realities. As early as the spring of 1973, a perceptible weakening could be detected in the trend of consumer buying in this country. The business community, however, paid little attention to this ominous development. The escalating pace of inflation fostered expectations of still higher prices and persistent shortages in the years ahead, so that intensive stockpiling of commodities continued. Inventories increased out of all proportion to actual or prospective sales. In fact, the ratio of inventories to sales, expressed in physical terms, had risen by the summer of 1974 to the highest figure for any business-cycle expansion since 1957—another year when a severe recession got under way.

In summary, the period from 1965 to 1974 was marked by a succession of interrelated, partly overlapping, speculative waves—first, in buying up of existing businesses; then, in the stock market, next, in markets for real estate; and finally, in markets for industrial materials and other commodities.

A prolonged speculative boom of this kind can seldom be traced to a single causal factor. In this instance, however, a dominant source of the problem appears to have been the lack of discipline in governmental finances.

The industrial phase of the long upswing drew to a close in late 1964 or early 1965. By then, the level of real output was very close to the limits imposed by our nation's physical capacity to produce. By then, the level of wholesale prices was already moving out of its groove of stability. Nevertheless, our Government did nothing to moderate the pace of expansion of aggregate monetary demand. On the contrary, it actually embarked on a much more expansive fiscal policy. The tax reductions of 1964 were followed in 1965 by fresh tax reductions and by a huge wave of spending both for new social programs and for the war in Vietnam. These misadventures of fiscal policy doomed the economy to serious trouble, but we were slow to recognize this. Indeed, substantial tax reductions occurred again in 1969 and 1971, and they too were followed by massive increases of expenditures.

Deficits therefore mounted, and they persisted year in and year out. Over the last ten complete fiscal years—that is, from 1965 through 1974—the Federal debt held by the public, including obligations of Federal credit agencies, rose by more than 50 per cent. The large and persistent deficits added little to our nation's capacity to produce, but they added substantially to aggregate monetary demand for goods and services. They were thus directly responsible for much of the accelerating inflation of the past decade.

Monetary and credit policies were not without some fault. As every student of economics knows, inflation cannot continue indefinitely without an accommodating increase in supplies of money and credit. It is very difficult, however, for a central bank to maintain good control of money and credit when heavy governmental borrowing drives up interest rates, and when the public is unwilling to face squarely the long-run dangers inherent in excessively stimulative economic policies.

To make matters worse, laxity in our national economic policies spilled over into private markets. The "new economics," of which less is now heard than before, held out the possibility, if not the actual promise, of perpetual prosperity. Many businessmen and financiers came to view the business cycle as dead, and to expect the Federal Government to bail out almost any enterprise that ran into financial trouble. All too frequently, therefore, the canons of financial prudence that had been developed through hard experience were set aside.

Many of our business corporations courted trouble by permitting sharp reductions in their equity cushions or their liquidity. In the manufacturing sector, the ratio of debt to equity—which had been stable in the previous decade—began rising in 1964 and nearly doubled by the end of 1974. Moreover, a large part of the indebtedness piled up by business firms was in the form of short-term obligations, and these in turn grew much more rapidly than holdings of current assets.

Similar trends developed in some segments of commercial banking. Large money-market banks came to rely more heavily on volatile short-term funds to finance their business customers, and at times they increased their loan commitments to businesses beyond prudent limits. A few bank managers, too, began to concern themselves excessively with maximizing short-run profits, so that the prices quoted for their common stock would move higher. Capital ratios of many banks deteriorated; questionable loans were extended at home and abroad; insufficient attention was given here and there to the risks of dealing in foreign exchange markets; and too much bank credit went into the financing of speculative real estate ventures.

A variety of loose practices also crept into State and local government finance. Faced with rapidly expanding demands for services and limited sources of revenue, some governmental units resorted to extensive short-term borrowing and employed dubious accounting devices to conceal their budget deficits. Statutory debt limits were circumvented through the creation of special public authorities to finance the construction of housing, schools, and health facilities. Some of these authorities issued so-called "moral obligation" bonds, which investors in many instances regarded as the equivalent of "full faith and credit" obligations. The novel financial devices seemed innocuous at the time, but they have recently become a source of serious concern to investors in municipal securities.

A nation cannot realistically expect prosperous economic conditions to continue very long when the Federal Government fails to heed the warning signs of accelerating inflation, when many of its business leaders spend their finest hours arranging financial maneuvers, and when aggressive trade unions push up wage rates far beyond productivity gains. After 1965, the strength of the American economy was gradually sapped by these ominous trends. Productivity in the private nonfarm sector, which had grown at an annual rate of 3.6 per cent from 1961 through 1964, slowed to a 2.2 per cent rate of advance from 1964 to 1969, then to 1.5 per cent from 1969 to 1974. Expansion in the physical volume of national output likewise declined during successive quinquennia. The rate of inflation, meanwhile, kept accelerating.

With the pace of inflation quickening, seeds of the current recession were thus sown across the economy. Rising prices eroded the purchasing power of workers' incomes and savings. Corporate profits diminished—a fact that businessmen were slow to recognize because of faulty accounting techniques. New dwellings were built on a scale that greatly exceeded the underlying demand. Inventories of commodities piled up, often at a fantastic pace, as businessmen reacted to gathering fears of shortages. Credit demands, both public and private, soared and interest rates rose to unprecedented heights.

These basic maladjustments are now being worked out of the economic system by recession—a process that entails enormous human and financial costs. Our country has gone a considerable distance in developing policies to alleviate economic hardships, and these policies have been strengthened recently. Nevertheless, the recession has wrought great damage to the lives and fortunes of many of our people.

This recession has cut deeply into economic activities. It must not, however, be viewed as being merely a pathological phenomenon. Since we permitted inflation to get out of control, the recession is now performing a painful—but also an unavoidable—function.

First, it is correcting the imbalances that developed between the production and sales of many items, also between orders and inventories, between capital investment and consumer spending, and between the trend of costs and prices.

Second, business managers are responding to the recession by moving energetically to improve efficiency—by concentrating production in more modern and efficient installations, by eliminating wasteful expenditures, by stimulating employees to work more diligently, and by working harder themselves.

Third, the recession is improving the condition of financial markets. Interest rates have moved to lower levels as a result of declining credit demands and of the Federal Reserve's efforts to bolster the growth of money and credit. Commercial banks have taken advantage of the reduced demand for loans to repay their borrowings from Federal Reserve Banks, to reduce reliance on volatile sources of funds, and to rebuild liquid assets. The rapidly rising inflow of deposits to thrift institutions has likewise permitted a reduction of indebtedness and addition to their liquid assets.

Fourth, the recession is wringing inflation out of the economic system. Wholesale prices of late have moved down, and the rise of consumer prices has also slowed. Although general price stability is not yet in sight, a welcome element of price competition has at long last been restored to our markets.

These and related business developments are paving the way for recovery in economic activity. No one can foresee with confidence when the recovery will begin. The history of our country indicates clearly, however, that the culminating downward phase of a long cycle need not be of protracted duration.

Signs are multiplying, in fact, that an upturn in economic activity may not be far away. For example, employment rose in April after six successive months of decline. The length of the workweek also stabilized last month. The rate of layoffs in manufacturing is now turning down, and some firms have been recalling workers who formerly lost their jobs. Sales of goods at retail—apart from autos—have risen further. Business and consumer confidence has been improving. And prospects for an early upturn in economic activity have been strengthened by passage of the Tax Reduction Act of 1975.

Our nation stands at present at a crossroads in its history. With the long and costly cycle in business activity apparently approaching its end, the critical task now is to build a solid foundation for our nation's economic future. We will accomplish that only if we understand and benefit from the lessons of recent experience.

Since World War II, a consensus has been building in this country that the primary task of economic policy is to maintain full employment and promote maximum economic growth. We have pursued these goals by being ever ready to stimulate the economy through increased Federal spending, lower taxes, or monetary ease. Neglect of inflation, and of longer-run economic and financial problems, has thus crept insidiously into public policy making. Our Government has become accustomed to respond with alacrity to any hint of weakness in economic activity, but to react sluggishly, and sometimes not at all, to signs of excess demand and developing inflationary pressures.

The thinking of many of our prominent economists has encouraged this bias in our economic policies. During the 1950's and 1960's, they frequently argued that "creeping inflation" was a small price to pay for full employment. Some even suggested that a little inflation was a good thing—that it energized the economic system and thus promoted rapid economic growth.

This is a dangerous doctrine. While inflation may begin slowly in an economy operating at high pressure, it inevitably gathers momentum. A state of euphoria then tends to develop, economic decision-making becomes distorted, managerial and financial practices deteriorate, speculation becomes rampant, industrial and financial imbalances pile up, and the strength of the national economy is slowly but surely sapped. That is the harsh truth that the history of business cycles teaches.

To emphasize this truth, I should now like to offer this distinguished group of journalists a bit of professional advice. Since few of you are reluctant to pass along hints as to how I should do my job, I have decided to suggest to you what the really big economic news story of 1975 is likely to be.

The story has to do with the drama now unfolding on Capitol Hill in the implementation of the Budget Control Act adopted last year. If I am right in thinking that our present economic difficulties are largely traceable to the chronic bias of the Federal budget toward deficits, there can be no doubt about the importance of what is now being attempted. No major democracy that I know of has had a more deficient legislative budget process than the United States —with revenue decisions separated from spending decisions and the latter handled in piecemeal fashion. Budgets in this country have just happened. They certainly have not been planned.

We are now attempting to change that by adopting integrated Congressional decisions on revenues and expenditures. My advice to you journalists is to follow this new effort closely. It has a significance for our nation that may carry far into the future. But nothing can be taken for granted here. We have tried budgetary reform once before under the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946, and it failed. It failed partly because of the challenge to cherished Committee prerogatives, partly also because Congress as a whole balked at accepting so much self-discipline. I would urge you to study the history of that earlier effort and to watch the present undertaking for telltale signs of similar faltering.

The potential gain for our nation from budget reform is enormous even in this first year of "dry run." If, in fact, the work of the new budget committees produces in the Congress a deeper understanding of the impossibility of safely undertaking all the ventures being urged by individual legislators, a constructive beginning toward a healthier economic environment will have been made. On the other hand, if the new budget procedures are scuttled, or if they are used with little regard to curbing the bias toward large-sized Federal deficits, there ultimately may be little anyone can do to prevent galloping inflation and social upheaval.

I am inclined to be optimistic about the outcome. More and more of our people are becoming concerned about the longer-range consequences of Federal financial policies. Perspective on our nation's economic problems is gradually being gained by our citizens and their Congressional representatives. A healthy impatience with inflation is growing. You journalists are becoming more actively involved in the educational process. I therefore remain hopeful that we shall practice greater foresight in dealing with our nation's economic problems than we have in the recent past, and that we will thus build a better future for ourselves and our children in the process.