

commentary

from other pens...

Consumers' mood based on personal experience

By Will Lester

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Americans form their opinions about the economy based on what they have to shell out for groceries and gas, conditions at the workplace, and chats with family and friends.

Personal experiences play at least as big a role in affecting the confidence in the economy as does watching TV news or the stock market, say consumers and the professionals who gauge the public mood.

"I just know I'm paying more for things — especially gasoline," said Melissa Blile, a Canton, Ohio, mother of two young children. "Most of it is just based on personal experience. I'm ready to tear my hair out."

Ken Goldstein, an economist with the Conference Board in New York, says the Consumer Confidence Index the board releases each month is derived from many sources, with news reports about job losses, the stock market and energy prices just a part of the picture.

Consumers, Goldstein said, "are getting this information flow, but it has to get validated or contradicted when they go to work, the store, the gym ... when they go to church."

The Consumer Confidence Index travels at levels from 120 to 130 in good economic times, Goldstein said, and even rocketed up to 145 in May 2000. The index dropped 14 points to 114 in January, its lowest level since December 1996. Goldstein reminds that the confidence level remains relatively high, despite the drop-off — it has fallen to 60 or below in tough economic times.

"In 1997, 1998 and 1999 we knew where we were," he said of a period of high consumer exuberance and high employment. "The only people sitting home watching Jerry Springer were doing it by choice. Now it isn't so much pessimism, it's we're not sure where we are."

The Consumer Confidence Index will be issued again Tuesday.

"I do think the press loves change and so have they been quick to embrace the concept that the economy is going south," said Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism, adding the coverage may not be overstated.

"You've got the chairman of the Federal Reserve (Alan Greenspan) saying things are changing, the stock market going south, companies failing to meet their projections, an energy crisis in the West and rising energy costs all around the country."

For the past 15 years, ABC News and Money Magazine have tracked public opinion on the economy. Pollsters at ABC have come to the conclusion their consumer index is driven more by real-life experiences than by reaction to the news.

"We find that short-term fluctuations of the stock market and media coverage of the economy have less of an effect on consumer confidence," said Dan Merkle, assistant director of the network's polling operation. "It is driven mainly by people's real-world experiences — particularly their income, level of debt and job prospects."

That's the same finding of Richard Curtin, director of consumer surveys at the University of Michigan.

"Our survey recorded its steepest decline from Thanksgiving to Dec. 10," Curtin said. "At that time, the news was focused almost entirely on the undecided (presidential) election."

"People had to be using informal sources of information, their neighbors, relatives and employers' prospects, their shopping experiences. ... Consumer confidence has remained high, but change is important. The declines have been sharp and large, and must be taken seriously."

By late last year, consumers had been spending all of their income and accumulating near record levels of debt, Curtin said. "As long as their finances seemed manageable, they didn't see a problem."

Consumers clearly are concerned about where things are going next. "I'd like to see what's going to happen," said Barbara Bacon, a 43-year-old deli worker in Everett, Wash. "President Bush has promised that things will get better. I want to see if he will keep that promise."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Will Lester covers polling and politics for The Associated Press.



I am important, and I don't feel guilty about it!

I don't know about you, but I think I'm important. It has taken me a lot of years to stop feeling guilty about thinking that.

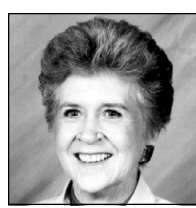
I come from a family with a long line of self-image problems. Many of my ancestors had inferiority complexes; they preferred following to leading, being behind the scenes instead of in the spotlight.

My mother once said to me, "I don't know where you came from. If you hadn't been born at home, I would have sworn you were switched at the hospital." She loved me, but didn't understand me.

But then, I didn't understand her either. I urged her to join the church's women's group, but she didn't want to. When I insisted on knowing why, she said, "Because sometime I'll be expected to host a meeting in our home."

"So what's wrong with that?" I asked. She said, "Our house is not as fancy as the other women's houses."

I shot back at her some words of wisdom I'd heard from her in other situations. "At least it's clean!" I didn't understand. She was a good cook, a wonderfully patient mother. Why did she feel that she didn't measure up?



lorna g. t.

• commentary

I almost always have felt comfortable wherever I was, whatever I was doing. Oh, there have been times when I felt guilty about thinking I was as good as the next person. Yet while feeling as good, I seldom felt better than anyone. I just always seemed content with who I was.

As the years have passed, I've come to terms with my self-image. As a child of God, I AM important — as important, yet no more important, than any other child of God.

I somehow knew I was loved and therefore of value, but my mother never felt that way. She would recoil in disgust every time she heard the commercial that ended with "I'm worth it!" Once I asked why, and she said, "Because it sounds so haughty. I've never felt I should say that about myself in any situation."

I was shocked. "But you ARE worth it, Mom. I

love you and God loves you. You are important!"

She must have spent some time thinking about it. Several remarks and circumstances showed me that she was re-considering her worth. Her self-esteem began to grow. I was proud of her and kept pointing out her good qualities and talents.

A week before she died, she asked me, "Do you think I'm good enough to have a brand new quilt put on my bed? I've never used a new one for me."

I couldn't believe it. This woman who had made beautiful quilts all her life for other people had never slept under a new one. I don't remember saying anything for a minute. Then, I got up and went into her bedroom. I stripped the bed and then said, "Which one do you like the best?"

She smiled, went and got it, and together we made the bed. When finished, I hugged her and said, "Yes, Mom, you are worth it. You should have done this years ago."

She smiled. She only slept under that quilt two nights, but I'll never forget her smile.

I wish Mom, early in her life, had read this quote: "I'm going to take much more time for the care and feeding of ME." She thought too much of others, and not enough of herself.

We need to find families who value peace, quiet

You hear a lot of talk about how we need to keep young people in town if we want to save our community, but it is one of those things that is easier said than done.

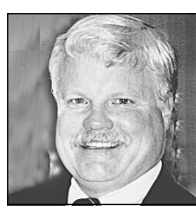
In today's world, there is little to attract young people to rural communities. We send them off to college in bigger towns, and hey, once they've seen the bright lights, how you gonna get them to come back to the farm?

Attracting 20-somethings sounds good, but it's not that easy to sell.

Years ago, young people went off to college and expected to come home to run their fathers' stores and farms, perhaps, but that was years ago. The decline in rural population has been going on for a century, not just in Oberlin but all across the plains, from Canada to Texas.

The advance in agriculture which has allowed to feed an ever-growing world with an ever-shrinking farm population is to blame. The same government that paid farmers to stay on the land was paying land-grant colleges to drive them off.

In the 21st century, though, we are approaching the end of that decline, the day when there are so few farm operations out there that their numbers will stabilize. We are not there; we still have hun-



steve haynes

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dreds and thousands of operations across the region which will go out of existence when their owners retire. Meantime, the government pays them to stay on the land. But the decline cannot go on much longer.

When that happens, we will be left with county seat towns which are about the same size they always have been, maybe a little smaller, and a countryside which is largely empty.

We will have schools, businesses, hospitals and churches, but fewer people to support them.

As ever, the kids will go away for more education after high school, all but a very few of them. The numbers today in small towns typically exceed 90 percent.

Most of these kids will get used to the city life, the parties and fun that accompany being at school with a few thousand others their own age. At 22,

they will not want to move home. They will want the jobs, the challenge and the social life that the city offers. Most of them, anyway.

And we could spend a lot of money trying to lure them back in their 20s without much success.

If we get them here, they are liable to be unhappy with their social life and prospects for a mate.

While we might create jobs, we won't grow fast enough to provide a social life — or a pool of partners.

Our best chance to grow and prosper might be to aim a little higher, toward young families in the 30-plus range.

These people match the demographics of our current business and professional population, from farming to retail to medical.

The ones we are looking for are married, have a family or are starting one, and their values have changed. They want the peace and quiet, stability and safety that a small town can provide.

If we can provide jobs or business opportunities to them, there is a real chance they will come, settle in and prosper. With them, so would our towns.

How to get from here to there is another thing entirely. We need more ideas.

But knowing what to work for is a start.

Clinton: The man to lead the African AIDS war

WASHINGTON — Seventeen million dead! Twenty-five mortally wounded!

If Europe were hit with such ghastly casualties, would America be sitting on the sidelines? If the lands of our roots — England, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Poland and all our others — faced a global predator capable of such horror, would we Americans avert our glances?

You, the reader, know the answer. As in 1914 and 1939, this country would be hot with debate. What should we do? How can we help our friends fight this fiend that kills without sympathy?

I speak, for those still unaware, not of Europe at the advent of World War I or II, but of sub-Saharan Africa at the outbreak of World War III.

Without much notice here, the fatality lists on that continent have entered the same horrendous league. Seventeen million Africans have died of AIDS. Twenty-five million are infected with HIV. If this World War III continues for even a handful more years, it will kill more humans on this one continent than the 50 million killed on every front and death camp in World War II.

What will America do this time? Will we wait, as we did in the years before Pearl Harbor, hoping the danger might be arrested somewhere beyond our shores?

Secretary of State Colin Powell spoke this week for the opposing view. "AIDS is a national security problem," he said. "It is a devastating problem in sub-Saharan Africa. Millions of people are at risk. Millions of people will die no matter what we do. This creates a major problem for Africa and



chris matthews

• commentary

other parts of the world where AIDS is spreading. It is a pandemic. It requires our attention, and Congress has to be generous."

The question is whether the United States will now apply the same "Powell doctrine" in fighting AIDS in Africa that we did confronting Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf. Will we build the necessary popular support for the campaign here at home? Will we bring the overwhelming force needed to destroy the enemy in the field?

So far, the only battalions fighting on the front lines are intrepid contingents of the Peace Corps.

Volunteers in South Africa, Lesotho and neighboring nations are teaching men how to use condoms, women how to resist them when they don't. They are helping the orphans of AIDS victims learn work skills that could mean their survival. Beyond their assigned jobs, many Peace Corps volunteers are providing care to the HIV-infected themselves.

But the flood of HIV and AIDS is, tragically, of biblical might. It attacks not the young and the old but young adults, including the continent's "best and brightest," those on whose shoulders its struggling nations most depend. These include the hard-working miners who spend months away from their

wives and the young, better-educated civil servants also assigned to remote posts.

For Secretary Powell and for President Bush, the question is, who will lead this fight in Africa? If it is not the United States, this country of huge medical might and historic wealth, then who?

And if AIDS in Africa is a threat to our "national security," as Secretary Powell has determined, who should carry the U.S. banner?

I suggest the name of President Bush's predecessor, William Jefferson Clinton. His proposed new office in Harlem would give him an excellent command post from which to champion the American campaign against a global menace that is killing at greater number and efficiency than Hitler, Tojo and Mussolini combined.

Chris Matthews, chief of the San Francisco Examiner's Washington Bureau, is the host of "Hardball" on CNBC and MSNBC cable channels. The 1999 edition of "Hardball" was published by Touchstone Books.)

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