

Maddog Unleashed

Good Times, Bad Times: With The Election Won, The Battle's Only Begun



“What the American economy has going for it is the innate optimism of the public. Americans get optimistic at the drop of a hat.” —Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center, whose polls show upswings in the number of people planning to cut spending and in the number expecting the economy to improve next year.

BY PATRICK O’GRADY

Thanksgiving came early this year, on Tuesday, Nov. 4. Happily, we didn’t get the turkey this time. Seems eight years of leftovers from that last tainted bird left a lot of us with upset stomachs.

Election Day 2008 marked the first time in 36 years of voting that I’d chosen the winning side, and as John McCain conceded to Barack Obama, the wife and I uncorked a bottle of champagne. It was almost a pleasure, come morning, to suffer a post-election pain in the brain instead of the butt.

This was only the first step on a long and rocky road, to be sure. But the president-elect seems determined to walk that walk, ready to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty, which in itself will be a refreshing change from business as usual.

Come January, there’s a whole mess of brush that needs clearing off the national ranch, with the economy being the thorniest patch.

The Great Recession. Last month I asked readers of this column and my Web site how they were handling the teetering economy, and if the answers weren’t exactly out of the late Studs Terkel’s “Hard Times,” neither did I hear any rousing choruses of “Happy Days Are Here Again.”

Most respondents reported stretching their grocery dollars further, into meatless dinners, leftovers and brown-bag lunches. Some were carpooling to work, selling the car altogether and riding bikes and/or public transportation, and taking on household chores that they’d previously jobbed out.

Everyone was focused on paying down or eliminating debt; no one was buying anything frivolous.

Pinching Pennies. “Your bosses won’t want to hear this, but I’m not going to buy anything that isn’t 100 percent necessary for my bikes,” said Steve O’Dell, a Colorado schoolteacher. “No new clothes, no matter how big the sale. No upgrades or replacements for the sake of replacing something. If it ain’t broke, I’m not going to fix it, and if it is broke, I’m going to try duct tape or baling wire first.”

Khalil Spencer, a New Mexico bicycle activist, is buying only small stuff—a new light for his commuter bike, the occasional small part, tires, tubes and chains. Visiting his local bike shop “is weird lately,” he added. “You walk in and they eye you like their next meal depends on it. Probably does.”

Wants vs. Needs. Bruce Maxwell, a retired Colorado clergyman on a pension, was preaching the judicious use of credit cards. “If I can’t pay the balance when the bill comes, I don’t buy,” he said. “I survive by learning the difference between a want and a need. I survive in finding peace and satisfaction in things that don’t cost. I had a great 10-mile bike ride today.”

Ben Schapiro, an Illinois library director with “a comfortable income and a secure job,” is still spending. But he’s doing so judiciously, and with people he knows, dividing his bike business between two stores owned by friends.

“Connectedness matters,” Ben said. “Don’t go to the mall—buy from folks you know when you can. In many situations the product is going to be the same, but money spent locally will circulate locally more than money spent at the big box or national chain.”