

## COOL HAND LUKE ON NERVOUS STEED

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The public voices of opposition to George W. Bush are building their case -- that he is responsible for "talking down the economy," that he's in thrall to cash-heavy corporate contributors who have descended upon Washington like the wolf on the fold, that he's broken his word about the environment, that he is secretly working to rush through confirmation of an army of conservative judges.

But the private voices of the opposition know better, that Bush is knocking it out of the park, eating their lunch, and dinner, and breakfast, leaving them naked in the public square with an agenda whose major plank is obstruction, linked in part to whether Sen. Strom Thurmond dies sooner or later.

And a good thing it is that Bush has picked up the reins so quickly. The economic trail ahead is rocky, and the landscape is hazy.

By definition, the immediate future of a free market economy is unknowable, but this moment is as weird as any in the past half a century. That it's Bush's "fault," that it started downward in December of 2000 when Dick Cheney said we "might be on the leading edge of a recession," is barely worth rebuttal. The NASDAQ started its dive a year ago. Corporate earnings were headed south by mid-2000.

The idea that "the corporate interests" are bending America out of shape for their own craven motives is almost as dumb. Yes, indeed, the coal industry gave big bucks to candidate Bush, and yes, indeed, they did well when, after careful study within the administration, he decided to publicly modify his views about carbon dioxide

emissions. But the natural gas industry also gave big bucks to Bush, and they lost out on the decision.

Might we ever get it through our thick skulls, or those of the Pulitzer-seeking media mavens, that not every political decision, nor most, are political payoffs to fat cats? Or that when business benefits, the ordinary voter need not get hurt. (After all, 52 percent of Americans own stocks.) Or that most good jobs come about through the private enterprise system?

And wouldn't it be nice if we stopped personalizing and politicizing the economy? Because politicians play politics, and newsmen noodle the news, that is probably impossible. But, no matter what they say, the American economy didn't grow because of Clinton or Greenspan. It didn't start going down because of Clinton or Greenspan, or Bush. When it turns around it won't because of Bush or Greenspan. Folks, the American economy has a life of its own, with 130 million people at work in a climate of remarkable commercial liberty.

Spleen vented. Withal, it is a most unusual moment, and scary. Is what we hear the sound of the bubble bursting, with possibly horrific effects, not just in the stock market, but in the real economy, where it counts? Could the "New Economy" have been just a happy-time blip? Could we be entering that most feared state, a "synchronous recession," where all the continents trip into the tank together?

Or is what we're seeing just one of those oscillating things, perhaps not even reaching the level of "cyclical?"

I lean toward the latter view for several reasons. The most important fact about the New Economy is it is not so new. Usually, it's said to have begun either in the early 1980s or the early 1990s (the date chosen as

a benchmark too often dependent on whether the describer seeks to laud Reagan Republicans or Clinton Democrats).

But the big muscular change in the American economy goes back half a century. From 1900 to 1950, there were six depressions or deep recessions when the Gross Domestic Product fell by more than 5 percent. Since 1950 there have been none. Economics may not be an exact science, but that's a pretty good run, leading one to think that the future will resemble the past. The little negative blips we've had since 1950 are barely visible on a fairly scaled long-term chart.

Given the latest configuration of the economy, we may not even get that negative blip. A 3 percent drop from an economy previously growing 2 percent takes that economy into negative territory. But the same 3 percent drop from an economy growing by 4 percent -- which has been the recent rate -- leaves a sluggish but positive economy. Which is where we are now, for a while.

At dicey times like these, Americans want a president acting like one. A president elected by 51 percent of the electoral vote wins 100 percent of the presidency and 100 percent of the constitutional power granted to a president. Splitting the difference with cry-baby Democrats on, for example, federal judgeships would turn the presidency wimpy. A nervous nation wants to see a firm hand on the reins, which is what they're seeing now.

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