Enjoying Christmas Despite the Tough Times

For the third December in a row, Americans enter the holiday season with an economy in shambles.

Whether or not the self-anointed arbiters of economic cycles declare the recession to have officially ended — as many hopeful economists are now claiming — in the third quarter of this year, more than 10 percent of Americans remain unemployed and the job market continues to contract. The U.S. dollar is in steep decline against gold and various foreign currencies, and concerns abound that further unwinding of an overvalued and overleveraged real-estate market is in the offing. Bank closures continue apace, and federal and state government debts continue to spiral to unexampled heights. Regardless of what official measures of economic health may indicate, the economic time of troubles that America and most of the rest of the world entered two Decembers ago is likely to persist for some time to come.

All of which means that Christmas, at least as this generation of Americans knows it, is likely to be different for the foreseeable future. Indebtedness, inflation, high unemployment, and unrelentingly high taxes are putting the squeeze on household budgets as has not been seen in decades. As a consequence, the lavish Christmases and exorbitant spending on extravagant gifts are a thing of the past for many households. Retailers have seen steep declines in sales the last two holiday seasons, and will likely see more of the same in 2009.

Yet Americans have enjoyed Christmases in hard times before. Christmas as we celebrate it nowadays is a comparatively recent invention, dating from the mid-19th century. Since the celebration of Yuletide became a national holiday during the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant, America has suffered two world wars, a Great Depression, and numerous other panics and recessions, some of which, like the Panic of 1907 and the recessionary 1970s, have permanently altered our country's economic landscape. But throughout, Christmas has grown in vitality and popularity both at home and abroad. In our day, it is easily the most important holiday (and holy-day), surpassing all others both in cultural and economic impact; not even the ongoing Great Recession is likely to make any difference either in Americans' love affair with this holiday or with the spirit that it ultimately represents.

This author came of age during the 1970s, a time of unremitting economic malaise. Early in the decade, the United States, which had printed vast sums of money to finance the Vietnam War, decided to take

the dollar off the international gold standard. There followed high rates of inflation coupled with economic stagnation ("stagflation," it was dubbed by financial pundits of the day). Oil prices soared and fuel was rationed in the mid-'70s. An economy that had grown without respite from the end of the Second World War until the mid-'60s spun its wheels for an entire generation (until the early '80s). The optimism of the '50s and early '60s (of which this author has no personal memory) was replaced by cynicism and pessimism born of the expectation that, sooner or later, the world would end in a nuclear Armageddon. Although the period has never been labeled a depression as such, the national mood, which this author well recalls, was certainly depressed, especially after Watergate and the end of the Vietnam War.

Christmases in those days were comparatively lean affairs (though still sumptuous in comparison with those of earlier generations). My brothers and I received a few nice presents — mostly books and modest toys — and my parents budgeted a strict amount (less than 100 dollars, if memory serves) for each child's gifts. Any request for a single large present — a bicycle, say, or a musical instrument — meant that the recipient received little else beyond a few pairs of socks and stocking stuffers. Some gifts were never forthcoming, because they were too expensive to fit into the Christmas budget. Christmas cookies, wreaths, and other decorations were almost all homemade. Christmas was always spent at home, with visiting restricted to those relatives who lived close by. Holiday travel in the modern sense was much less common 30 years ago.

Even my parents, devoted though they were (and remain) to each other, never splurged on gaudy, expensive gifts for one another. I cannot recall a single instance of jewelry, vehicles, costly clothing, or other high-ticket items changing hands on Christmas morning. Instead, they were and still are content with a few heartfelt offerings like books, clothing, and needed tools and household appliances.

My experiences with Christmas were by no means universal, even in those comparatively lean times. Some of my schoolmates received expensive gifts like rifles, motorcycles, and even cars, from parents either better off or less financially inhibited than my parents, yet it never occurred to me to be jealous of them.

To an earlier generation than my own fell the lot of enduring an entire decade of Christmases in the greatest economic downturn the world has ever seen. It is hard today to imagine the lifestyle of the Great Depression during the 1930s, when up to a quarter of all Americans were unemployed. Although the actual periods of recession during that dreary decade accounted for only about four years, the economy declined and then stagnated until the end of the Second World War. Millions of Americans could barely afford to eat, let alone celebrate Christmas with anything approaching the splendor of recent generations. One of the most popular gifts of the day — where gifts were affordable at all — was a single orange, a considerable delicacy in the days before modern transportation. As Richard Grondin, now in his mid-80s, recalled in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, "An orange [in the Christmas stocking] was a big thing because you couldn't afford one during the year." For Grondin and millions of other American children of the day, Christmas presents consisted almost entirely of secondhand and homemade articles, with the occasional brand new wagon or sled providing a welcome and unexpected contrast.

Yet even the grinding poverty failed to dampen the holiday spirit. "We never felt any different from anybody else," Grondin recalled. "Everybody was poor. Nobody had money. If you had food to eat and a place to sleep, you were thankful for that."

For many children of the Depression, the notion of toys for Christmas was impossible to imagine. "Toys were a special treat reserved for only the very youngest," remembered Clarence Jamison, Sr. in the

Plain Dealer, adding that older children usually received only "very practical" gifts like items of clothing. Salvatore Calandra received only a quarter, a tangerine, and a few walnuts for Christmas. "We didn't know what [toys] were," he said. "You'd see them in the window of Higbee's or Sterling-Lindner. But they were just something to be looked at." Another child of the Great Depression, Edward Ferreri, was once lucky enough to receive a bike, albeit a used one with a broken front wheel. "I put new spokes in it and it ran for years," he recalled fondly.

Spirit of the Season

Through all the pain of those times, the essential spirit of the season was undiminished. Small children by all accounts waited for Santa Claus with as much anticipation as today's more materially fortunate generation. Churches, then as now, filled to overflowing, and Americans gave such as they could spare to various charitable causes. Many of the finest Christmas movies ever made (*Miracle on 34th Street*, *Holiday Inn*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example) came from the Great Depression/World War II era and its immediate aftermath, suggesting that Americans of the day saw nothing amiss in Christmas amid times of want and war.

Since the end of the Second World War, the material abundance we enjoy has climbed to dizzying summits; until recently, only the malaise of the '70s caused any serious setbacks. But now, a generation markedly more secular and self-indulgent than that of the Great Depression faces the prospect of Christmases without overflowing cornucopias of gifts and plenty. How will we respond?

If past is any prelude, we will adapt and, in the process, perhaps, rediscover some of the more meaningful elements of Christmas that have been muted by the din of materialism and shallow entertainment. (Who could possibly claim that any of Hollywood's recent Christmas offerings have any stature beside the aforementioned Jimmy Stewart Christmas classic, for example?) The lean times of the '30s and '40s seem heroic in retrospect — they produced what the media has dubbed the "greatest generation" — but they followed close on the heels of the shallow, materialistic "Roaring Twenties." That decade of abandon — fueled in no small measure by easy money policies at the fledgling Federal Reserve and the Bank of England that sowed the seeds for the Depression that followed — saw the advent of many of the features of the modern age: mass media; mass entertainment; a generation gap between rebellious, convention-subverting youth and their more conservative parents; and the techniques of mass production that allowed consumer goods to be manufactured on an epic scale and shipped to stores across the country.

It was a time of silliness. A generation that refused to grow up dissipated its energies (and money) in fast cars, absurd clothing styles, and, of course, frivolous investments of every kind. Little in that illusionary span of riotous living prepared Americans for the hardship that was to follow.

But when the Great Depression struck, Americans responded. Though shorn of the affluence of the preceding decade, Americans accepted the "new reality" with good humor and adapted to scarcity without succumbing to the extremes of fatalistic self-indulgence or revolution.

So too, we hope, in our day. So far, we have every indication that Americans are dialing back and reining in the instinct to consume. Eating out, needlessly expensive cars, reflexive shopping, maxed-out credit cards — these, the habits of the longest and most extravagant economic boom in history, are slowly but surely being set aside. The new thrift, to the dismay of retailers, has made its presence felt in contracting spending and sales during the holiday season. While we cannot agree with the likes of Dr. Joel Waldvogel, economist at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, whose aptly titled book

Scroogenomics casts serious doubt on the entire Christmas gift-giving phenomenon, we are surely better off without the excess of holiday spending fueled by an artificial credit boom.

After all, though it may seem clichéd to say it, Christmas is much more a reaffirmation of family and faith than a binge of consumption. Most of us forget, with the passage of years, many of the gifts given and received from one Christmas to the next. But how many memories of cherished family Christmas traditions dim over time?

Though my brothers and I are long grown and our parents in their latter years, our particular suite of family holiday traditions has varied very little. To the extent that we still celebrate Christmas together, we still decorate the tree on Christmas Eve, with the Robert Shaw Chorale's magnificent Christmas album, "The Many Moods of Christmas," playing in the background, just as we did when I was a small boy 40 years ago. My mother still makes many of the same Christmas cookies, to be unveiled Christmas Eve after we have read the nativity passages in Matthew and Luke and have sung various favorite carols. My mother, her voice only rarely cracking, still sings a magnificent version of "O Holy Night," just as she has done since she was a young woman with operatic-quality vocal talents and aspirations. And gift-opening Christmas morning always follows a sumptuous breakfast of omelets and coffee cake. There is and always has been for me a timeless quality about Christmas, when the burden of the years falls away for a few precious days and when the shades of departed friends and loved ones seem very near at hand.

Every American family that observes Christmas has its own set of beloved traditions. Traditions, indeed, are among the very most important bonds that unify and define any human society, and none are more central than traditions associated with those things we hold to be most sacred. Among the many traditions that we use to commemorate the birth of the Prince of Peace, the bestowal of extravagant gifts is surely one of the least important. Creches, caroling, Christmas trees, and family gatherings — unaffected as they are by economic vagaries — are infinitely more meaningful and enduring.

Still, the severity of our economic peril is impossible to ignore altogether. No one can foresee whether conditions may yet come to approach those of a Great Depression that taught its children to shun debt and credit cards, to invest their money in CDs and blue-chip stocks, and to strive to pay off the mortgage on a single-family home as quickly as possible. But what we have already experienced has schooled Americans in the almost forgotten art of frugality.

None of this, however, is likely to affect Christmas except in the purely economic sense. Retail sales may disappoint and shelves may turn out to be overstocked, but the tenor of the holiday season in its essence will probably remain unchanged for generations yet unborn.