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WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE BOOM?

(Summary of Remarks of C. Canby Balderston, Vice Chairman,  
Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System,  
before the Joint Meeting of the Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Md. Chapters  
of the Society of Savings and Loan Controllers on May 14, 1958.)

Factors other than central bank policies are the major influences affecting the availability of funds. A strong one is the amount of money that individuals and businesses are saving out of their current incomes. Also, the demand for credit varies according to whether people have a greater or lesser desire to borrow, and whether or not the government is borrowing.

Changes in the rate of growth of bank credit--since bank credit is a marginal element in the total credit supply--necessarily influence interest rates. A rise in interest rates tends to curb spending financed by credit and to stimulate saving; a fall in interest rates tends to encourage spending. Thus, by guiding the growth of bank credit, general monetary policy affects the incentives to spend borrowed funds, and also the incentives to save and to lend. In a real sense, the volume of bank credit is a vital balancing force in economic dynamics. And so, the Federal Reserve seeks to restrain credit growth when it increases too fast in periods of economic expansion, and to encourage credit growth in the face of deflation.

There may be a lesson worth learning if we analyze the current recession whose seeds were laid in the boom starting in 1955. What began as an orderly recovery from the recession of 1954 was converted by overoptimism and imprudent decision-making into a boom that was unsustainable. First, there developed a consumer boom featured by an almost unprecedented sale of houses and

automobiles. In that year, we had 1 million 300 thousand housing starts and sold about 7-1/2 million new automobiles. Consumer instalment debt increased rapidly in volume as the terms of automobile paper were liberalized.

In the following year, 1956, total consumer spending increased further even though housing starts fell 16 per cent and the number of automobiles sold dropped 20 per cent. A large share of the rise in debt, public and private, was accounted for by residential mortgages--this time 42 per cent of the rise in total debt as against 29 per cent of the rise in 1955. There was also superimposed on strong consumer spending an extraordinary expansion of plant and equipment. Such spending was 22 per cent larger than the year before. Perhaps it was prompted by the consumer boom, perhaps by the faith that demand would expand unceasingly because of population growth and technological advance. Some plants were built because of the expectation that building costs would continue to rise year after year and that the sooner the building was undertaken, the lower the total cost. In any case, confidence turned into ebullience that induced miscalculations and imprudent decision-making. The result of all this was excess capacity and cost-price dislocations. The latter have led to a profit-squeeze for some manufacturers and to price resistance on the part of some consumers.

The excesses of the boom have now brought about excess capacity relative to current demand, inventory reductions, production cutbacks, a distressing amount of unemployment, and a recession of uncertain duration and severity. Just when economic activity ceased to rise, how long it was topping off, and when it started to recede depends upon which indices are used as indicators. Common sense suggests that no one indicator alone will suffice.

The gross national product advanced sharply to a new high in the third quarter of last year, at an annual rate of \$440 billion. The Federal Reserve Board's seasonally adjusted index of industrial production fluctuated within a narrow range from December 1956 until September 1957. Such important economic series as personal income, nonfarm employment, and retail sales also advanced to record levels in midsummer of 1957. Subsequently, all of these measures of economic activity declined. On the other hand, wholesale prices have not receded yet and the consumer price index has been rising to a new high with each passing month. While consumers still feel the pinch of rising prices, a substantial percentage of them suffer loss of job and of income. Even though the threat of future inflation has not been eliminated, a more pressing problem has superseded it in the shape of a cyclical recession with attendant unemployment.

And so, in October of 1957, the Federal Reserve shifted its posture to fight this new enemy. It first gave an open signal of the changed policy by reducing the discount rate on November 15. Since that time, some critics have said that the Federal Reserve was merely making motions for psychological effect, without supplying bank reserves sufficient to make credit easier. These statements have even been made by bankers in the face of the fastest decline of interest rates in history.

Now for the record of what has actually happened to monetary policy.

(1) The discount rate has been lowered four times. It is now  $1\frac{3}{4}$  per cent, as compared with the  $3\frac{1}{2}$  per cent rate set last summer after commercial banks, responding to strong loan demands, had moved their prime rate up to  $4\frac{1}{2}$  per cent.

(2) Reserve requirements for demand deposits have been reduced on three occasions; this has released to member banks reserves of about \$1-1/2 billion.

(3) Beginning in the second half of October, open market operations were used to relax the policy of restraint. The System provided sufficient reserves in relation to the demands for bank credit to permit member banks to diminish their borrowings at the Reserve Banks. By the turn of the year, the level of these borrowings had dropped below that of excess reserves; net borrowed reserves turned into free reserves.

What has been the impact of these changes? Even though business activity has been slipping into a deepening recession, bank credit has been expanding and borrowing in the capital markets by business corporations, by State and local governments, and by the Federal Government and its agencies has also increased. The total of the issues, corporate, State and local, floated during the first five months of 1958 are likely to be almost \$1/2 billion greater than the year ago figure even though the first five months of last year was a boom period. These contrasting tendencies between business and financial activity are partly attributable to the generous supply of bank reserves. Despite the reduction of business borrowing from commercial banks, the latter have expanded other types of credit by amounts that far exceeded the business loan liquidation. A true understanding of what has happened can be secured only if the customary seasonal movements are taken into account. For example, total bank deposits, including time deposits, have gained during a time of year when they usually fall.

To appraise the net effect of the shift in monetary policy accurately, one should compare the change between late November and the end of April with

changes in the same period a year earlier. This year, during this interval, banks in leading cities increased their total loans and investments by more than \$6 billion whereas the year-ago total increased by less than \$1 billion. This would seem to represent a positive, not a grudging policy of ease, and to show that commercial banks have been supplied with ample reserves. The latter have been used by banks not only to get out of debt, but to expand credit contrary to the usual seasonal pattern. Despite the liquidation of business loans, banks have found other uses for funds by buying securities and by making security loans. One result of the marked liberalization of credit has been the sharp decline in interest rates. The rate on Treasury bills, which responds rather sensitively to the changes in the supply of free reserves, has now returned to the level prevailing early in 1955. This is true also of rates on bankers acceptances and on commercial paper. Long-term rates, less sensitive, have also fallen but less sharply because of the continued large volume of new security flotations. Mortgage interest rates too have been coming down.

In summary, it may be observed that the country's central banking system--the Federal Reserve--has supplied reserves liberally since the time when indicators showed that business activity had slipped off its high plateau and was trending downward into recession. But Federal Reserve policy alone is not adequate to curb the excesses of boom periods or to turn recession into recovery. Neither monetary policy nor fiscal policy, alone or in concert, can achieve these miracles in the face of mass psychology that creates alternating waves of unwarranted ebullience and pessimism. As Mr. Eugene Meyer, Chairman of the Board of the Washington Post-Times-Herald, observed over a third of a

century ago: "Over-expansion, inevitably and always, is characterized by over-confidence and its impelling power is found in cupidity. . . . If one could plot the curves of optimism and pessimism as exactly as one can plot the curves of prices and the volume of production and consumption, one would find that they fall considerably behind the material conditions. Only the few anticipate events; the many stop, look and listen after the event is past."