

No Crystal Ball Here, But...

I wish I could say that the path of the future is knowable, but it isn't. Not by me, not by anyone, other than the truly foolish who have been perched on a bar stool for last forty years. However, there are some interesting recent trends that just might make the future a very different place than what we thought it would be. Example: the current recession has collapsed the employment market, with the unemployment rate of over 12% in California and the national average hovering close to 10%. (And yes, I know that these figures have their down side — such as not including the underemployed and those that have left the unemployment rolls — but it's still an indicator). But as unemployment was rising, there was a surge in GDP to 5.6%, all at the same time that housing prices were falling through their own hardwood floors. How are we to make sense of all of this?

Recent improvements in solar cell technology might put pricing of solar cells at ridiculously low levels — one tenth of current manufacturing costs. The University of Texas at Austin is demonstrating a "paint on" solar cell fashioned around light-absorbing nanomaterials. Just as energy prices seem ready to soar, along comes a solar cell that might be in reach of every household on the planet. Current pricing is around \$3 per watt; with nanomaterials it could be 30 cents per watt.

Manufacturing jobs are diminishing in the United States and we think they are all going over to China, but China is losing manufacturing jobs at a faster pace than the rest of the world. Productivity is the criminal in this game. As reported in *Newsweek*, it once took 22 days to build a 737 Jetliner; it now takes 12 days. And what company out there is not spending what few dollars they *do* have on trying to pull labor out of their cost of goods sold? Will there be any economy in the world that will be primarily factory-based?

So what do we do with these displaced factory workers? Health care continues to employ more and more people. And we can only wonder if we will have a workforce that is large enough to care for the additional 30,000,000 citizens that the government says will be included under the new health care plans.

Here is something I can accurately predict about the future — education, coupled with creativity and the freedom to explore, is the best hedge against a continually unstable future. America is still the leader in education and can continue to be, if only we have enough smarts to continue funding it. Investment in education has a higher ROI than almost any other social program. 🐦

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