

MINNPOST.WORLD

The economy: Is something wrong, or is it just our imagination?

As a top economic adviser to John McCain, former Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas has suggested that America's current economic slump is largely "a mental recession" and that we are "a nation of whiners." While some suggest the nation is suffering from the voodoo economics Gramm and others advocated, two reports explore why America is in a sour mood.

By **STEVE BERG**

During his more than two decades in Congress, Phil Gramm of Texas was best known as an apostle of "voodoo economics," a term coined by President George H.W. Bush to describe the once trendy idea that low taxes on the wealthy solve every economic problem. (See also Reaganomics, supply-side and trickle-down economics.)

Now, as a top economic adviser to John McCain, Gramm has gone a step further by suggesting that America's current economic slump is largely "a mental recession" and that we are "a nation of whiners."

Still, Gramm's remarks seemed to embarrass McCain, who on Thursday was trying to demonstrate compassion to hard-pressed voters in Michigan. He said he disagreed with his adviser. "Phil Gram doesn't speak for me; I speak for me," McCain said.

Asked later if Gramm would be Treasury secretary in his administration, McCain said



REUTERS

Former Sen. Phil Gramm of Texas, left, and Sen. John McCain in March at an event in Phoenix.

that was no longer a possibility and suggested instead an ambassadorship to Belarus.

Barack Obama, meanwhile, also poked fun at Gramm's attempt at pop psychology, saying that we "already have one Dr. Phil." He added, "We need somebody to actually solve the economy; it's not just a figment of your imagination, it's not all in your head."

The psychological component

Ordinarily Gramm's statement might not have caused much stir. But Republicans, including McCain, have lately suggested a psychological component to the slumping economy.

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MINNPOST.WORLD

Journalist Julie Kramer trades truth for fiction in thriller

By AMY GOETZMAN

After working in TV news for years, including two decades at WCCO and freelance production stints with Dateline, NBC's Today Show and Nightly News, Julie Kramer knows how to tell a true story.

Turns out, she can make up some good ones, too.

"Like most journalists, I thought I had a novel in me," she says. "But boy, they don't write themselves. You have to grab them and pull them kicking and screaming onto the page."

Her first book, "Stalking Susan," a crime-thriller about an investigative TV journalist on the trail of a serial killer, is out July 15. The book is packed with local color: Characters crack open a cold Summit beer, gather at the St. Paul Broiler and navigate their way around the fallen 35W bridge.

Here's an excerpt:

Minnehaha, meaning "laughing waters," is named for its fifty-three-foot waterfall—another Minnesota reference from Longfellow's The Song of Hiawatha. I could hear the creek still running, but it was much too dark and snowy to see any of the park's natural beauty or historic Native American sculptures. Kids sometimes hang out after hours to smoke and drink, but not in this weather.

The parking lot near the Longfellow house was empty except for a tan SUV in the far corner. My headlights shone on its bumper as Roy Orbison sang a mournful: "If your lonely heart breaks, only the lonely."

The license plate read SUSAN.

"I like to weave in real detail," says Kramer, "because I love to read books set in places I know, and because it's a newsroom thriller. But some readers expect it all to be real. They'll pick out something I made up and say, 'I don't remember that happening,'" she says. But one key detail she wants people to remember is real:

Two dead women named Susan.

Ten years ago, Kramer worked on a story about two cold cases involving murdered women named Susan. The cases remain unsolved, and lingered in her memory, becoming the seed of inspiration for the book.

"I changed a lot of details about the locations, the decade, the women's occupations, and I added more murders. I almost changed the name Susan, but I didn't, because I wanted to keep something of them alive in the story. I never forgot them and I wanted other people to remember them, too. So, even though this is a work of fiction, I took it as an opportunity to remind people that there are still these two unsolved murders out there."

Dedicated to two victims named Susan

Susan Ginger Petersen was found in a Highland Park alley on May 17, 1983. Susan Jean Rheineck was found May 17, 1985, near the Mississippi River in St. Paul. St. Paul's cold case unit is reviewing the cases again, and Kramer will carry their contact number (651-266-5956) on her book tour, in case a reader has any information that could help.

In her book, the Susans are clearly connected. In real life? "I thought there were enough similarities that a connection couldn't be ruled out. If they were connected, most likely the name was a coincidence. But people get inspiration wherever they get inspiration, and as a journalist, I'm a 'ripped from the headlines' writer. But in the world of fiction you're free to ask, 'What if?'"

For Kramer, that question is followed by, "What next?" Her book took 2 1/2 years, from start to sale — warp speed for the book business, although painfully slow for this newsroom veteran.

"Boy, that feels like a long time to someone who is used to the live news cycle," she said.

"I just could not believe how slowly these people worked, how long everything took in the revisions process. There was a lot of time after the sale in which I kept losing confidence, kept questioning whether the book was any good or not."

Kramer's book sold as a two-book package, which meant she had to turn in a sequel within a year. Now deadlines, she could handle.

"I think a lot of my journalistic skills helped me," she said. "After you work through the 'it's all right to make things up,' issue, I found that news is a good background for writing fiction. Research is second nature to you. Deadlines didn't scare me. And I truly believe that interviewing people, many of them on the best and worst days of their lives, helped me develop an ear for dialogue. My agent/editor remarked that I have very tight, focused writing. That comes from news, too."

The early reviews have agreed. "Publishers Weekly gave me a starred review and called it an impressive debut, and then my agent started really liking me more. It's been recommended in Kirkus, Booklist — that industry acclaim is priceless," says Kramer, whose past life is also filled with acclaim.

Kramer's investigative work has garnered an impressive collection of national media laurels. "But nothing gets your friends and family thinking you're a real author than getting in People magazine. The book was reviewed in the Tim Russert issue, which meant a lot for me, because he's someone I really admire."

People put "Stalking Susan" in its "sizzling summer read" category. "In this snappily paced debut thriller, TV reporter Riley Spartz tries to stop a serial killer who's targeting women named Susan. Truly scary, no matter what your name is."

Raising respect for TV reporters

While Kramer finishes the next book, she is on unavailable status for TV work, but says she won't be able to stay away for long. "I like to get out on the chase. It's very exciting and energizing. And unlike writing, TV is a very collaborative process. You develop a real camaraderie."

In fact, her novel goes a long way toward raising respect for the oft-vilified TV newsperson. Her heroine, Riley Spartz, is a smart and principled investigator who fights as doggedly for truth and justice as she does against the "dumbing down" of the news. Spartz particularly wrestles with the fact that TV viewers seem to care more about dead dogs than dead women, and that soft consumer "news" catches bigger ratings than current events.

Kramer, who grew up on the Minnesota-Iowa border, left WCCO to spend more time with her teenage sons and to pursue national freelance work. She lives in White Bear Lake and is married to Joe Kimball, a former Star Tribune columnist who now writes for MinnPost.

"Have I exaggerated the flaws of the profession? Probably," she says, laughing — a little. "The Twin Cities market does like soft news. That might be true nationally as well. You'll recall when KARE-11 TV reinvented themselves as a feature network; that became the talk of the industry, and the industry wants to give viewers what they want. Figuring out exactly what that is, though, is the real mystery."

Former council member Zimmermann comes home

By DOUG GROW

Fifty-five pounds lighter and a year and a half older, former Minneapolis City Council Member Dean Zimmermann returned home Thursday morning. Or at least halfway home.

Zimmermann checked into a Lake Street halfway house, where he will serve at least part of what remains of a 30-month prison sentence he received for accepting “gratuities” in exchange for a promise of votes while he was a member of the council from 2001 to 2005. He was found guilty of three of four federal corruption counts in August 2006 and began his prison sentence in January 2007.

“I’m looking forward to being able to do useful work again,” said Zimmermann, who had prison time cut after completing a drug and alcohol treatment program.

Zimmermann, who is 66 years old, plans to start working soon for a local construction company, which is in keeping with his previous work. Before and after he was a council member, Zimmermann made his living as a handyman.

Family reunion

Zimmermann was picked up at the Minneapolis bus station Thursday morning, after traveling 23 hours by bus from the federal prison in Inglewood, Colo., by his wife, Jenny Heiser. It was a joyful reunion, she said.

Accompanied by Heiser and one of his sons, he almost went

straight to the halfway house. There was one stop along the way.

“He really wanted ice cream,” said Heiser.

What flavor?

“Vanilla, of course,” she said.

Vanilla after all that time in prison?

“He is from North Dakota, you know,” she said.

Though both Zimmermann and Heiser said they had changed over the course of the indictment and prison time, in many ways the two seemed no different. They both at least tried to remain activists.

For his part, Zimmermann, a Green Party member, attempted to start an organic garden and set up a recycling program at the prison. But both efforts were blocked by the warden, Heiser said.

“The warden came in and had the garden torn out because he said they were in violation of contracts the prison had [with food vendors],” Heiser said. “The same thing with the recycling. He said that the prison had a contract to produce a certain amount of waste.”

For her part, Heiser organized “The Wives of Inglewood.” They worked to get rates for such things as hotel rooms and car rental while visiting their imprisoned husbands.

Wasted lives

Heiser still clearly believes her husband was set up by politically motivated people in Minneapolis and the U.S. attorney’s office. It was just weeks before

the 2005 elections – which, because of redistricting, pitted Zimmermann against another incumbent, Bob Lilligren – that the Zimmermann-Heiser home was raided by FBI agents.

Unlike his spouse, Zimmermann has always been more circumspect about the process that led him to prison.

“Others will have to make up their own minds,” he said of his guilt or innocence.

While in prison, Zimmermann said he read a great deal, especially about solar heating. He hopes, after his sentence is fulfilled, to establish a business installing solar heating panels in older homes in poor Minneapolis neighborhoods. He said that when he first started talking about the problems of global warming “years ago, people thought I was weird. Now, everybody’s talking about it.”

He said he was saddened by so much of what he saw in prison, though he seemed untroubled by the fact that his name was misspelled – “Zimmerman” – the whole while he was imprisoned.

“A whole place filled with people wasting their lives,” he said.

On the other hand, he said he had considerable time for reflection and meditation.

“I found happiness in the zen of dishwashing,” he said.

He also found himself on rat-killing detail in the prison kitchen. But any further thoughts he might have on prison life, he said, will be saved for when his sentence is complete.

How’d he drop 55 pounds?

“Pretty simple,” he said. “You eat less and move more.”

Heiser said that after recovering from a period of deep anger over what she still considers an injustice, she worked harder than she’s ever worked to save the couple’s pleasant inner-city home. She started a “green-clean” business, a house and office cleaning business using environmentally safe products.

She said she has found peace, thanks to scores of friends who maintained their faith in her and her husband. Among those who offered friendship was one of the former council members who previously had been found guilty of federal corruption charges. (Prior to Zimmermann’s indictment, City Council members Joe Biernat and Brian Herron had been found guilty in federal court of corruption.)

She also maintained her sense of humor.

As the time came for her husband to move out of the prison and into the halfway house, she gave him a very bright pink gym bag to carry his personal items.

“I didn’t want him to lose the bag,” she said.

He didn’t. Smiling, he lugged it into the halfway house, apologizing to reporters for rushing off.

“I probably shouldn’t be late,” he said.

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

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“A lot of this is psychological, because I agree the fundamentals of our economy is still strong,” McCain said recently. He repeated his notion on Fox News saying that “a lot of our problems today, as you know, are psychological – the confidence, trust, the uncertainty about our economic future, ability to keep our own home.”

On other occasions he has mentioned the psychological benefit of his gas tax holiday idea. He has also said that a commitment to offshore oil drilling might give the economy a psychological lift, if nothing else.

Gramm’s remarks, from an interview in the Washington Times, came as the Pew Research Center released a new survey exploring the nation’s sour mood, including grumpiness about the economy. They came also on the heels of a Harvard University Magazine article detailing the widening economic disparity between the wealthy and other Americans. Many Democrats blame those widening disparities, evident over the last 30 years, on the supply-side and deregulation policies championed by Gramm – and now by McCain.

Let’s take a closer look at all three of those elements, first at Gramm’s comments to the Washington Times.

He said that the economy is weighed down above all by the mistaken conviction that economic conditions are the worst

in two or three decades and that America is in decline. “You’ve heard of mental depression; this is a mental recession,” he said, noting that technically the nation was not in recession.

“We have sort of become a nation of whiners,” he told the Washington Times. “You just hear this constant whining, complaining about a loss of competitiveness, America in decline, despite a major export boom.”

“We’ve never been more dominant; we’ve never had more natural advantage than we have today,” he said. “We have benefited greatly” from the globalization of the economy in the last 30 years. The former U.S. senator blamed the media for the loss of public confidence, although the interviewer pointed out that most analysts attribute the slump to record high gasoline prices and big drops in the value of homes.

“Misery sells newspapers,” Gramm continued. “Thank God the economy is not as bad as you read in the newspaper every day.”

Later, Gramm stood by his words as Democrats stepped in to criticize. Sen. Claire McCaskill of Missouri said his comments reflected on a candidate who’s “not in touch” with conditions in the country.

No illusions at the pump

Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota said when she last filled up her Saturn in the Twin Cities, “people at the pump were not hallucinating.”

Now to the Pew report on the nation’s mood (with a generational twist), as reported by the Washington Post’s Monica Hesse. Baby boomers, especially, she noted, are “a bunch of whiners.”

“More than older or younger generations, boomers – born from 1946 to 1964 – worry that their income won’t keep up with rising costs of living,” Hesse writes. “They say it’s harder to get ahead today than it was 10 years ago. They are more likely to say that their standard of living is lower than their folks’ but that things don’t look too good for their kids either (67 percent of younger generations, meanwhile, feel they have it better than their parents).”

Hesse continues: “Everything stinks, except for the things that stink even more, and it’s not exactly clear why, considering that this is the population with the highest median income. Boomers also have fewer difficulties affording housing or medical care, the survey says, and they enjoyed greater job security last year than older or younger generations. So what’s the deal?”

Why are boomers so cranky?

Hesse interviews experts to probe more deeply the boomers’ pessimistic mindset.

One possible influence is that their adult lives – since the 1970s – have been dominated by one unshakable economic trend: an ever widening gap between the rich and other Americans.

To them, life looks like a lottery in which a few were chosen for the fabulous wealth track while most others have lost ground. A detailed article, “Unequal America” by Elizabeth Gudrais in the current Harvard magazine, investigates this point.

Among Gudrais’ observations: The United States no longer ranks even among the top 40 nations in life expectancy, with the disadvantaged population suffering far poorer health than others. Americans, in general, have seemed to accept and tolerate this and other evidence of growing disparities as part of our unique culture and economic system. Inequality now compares to that of the Gilded Age – 1870 to 1900. The notion of social mobility, meanwhile, is exaggerated, she asserts. Forty percent of those born in the bottom quintile of income remain there as adults, with a similar result for those born at the top.

The Harvard article’s probe of a familiar topic might explain why the boomer generation has been in a sour mood for several decades and why Phil Gramm – and other champions of supply-side and deregulation policies – might be tempted to describe economic angst as a figment of the imagination.

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Want to add your voice?

If you’re interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.

The Daily Glean: Minneapolis water: stinky drinky

By DAVID BRAUER

The Strib's Rodrigo Zamith and Paul Walsh detail why Minneapolis water stinks right now. Too much Mississippi River algae and leaves, officials say, and they've upped chemical and carbon treatments. Interestingly, St. Paul hasn't had the problem because they filter water through four lakes before technology gets it; Minneapolis draws directly. St. Paul's water guy says his city can spend on taste while Minneapolis must emphasize treatment. The problem punches a big hole in Mayor R.T. Rybak's anti-bottled-water campaign.

John McCain was in town, proclaiming Minnesota a battleground state even though the polls don't show it and McCain's new "Love" ad is in every contestable place but here. MPR's Tom Scheck notes DFL Blue Dog Congressman Collin Peterson — never a Dem attack dog — slammed McCain, "who never met an ag bill that he could support." McCain pokes right back, nailing the Peterson-crafted bill for subsidizing thoroughbred race horses \$93 million and asparagus growers \$15 million. KARE has video here.

MPR's Mark Zdechlik notes Norm Coleman and Al Franken each raised about \$2.3 million from April to June; Coleman's sitting on \$3 million more in cash, at \$7.2 million. The duo has now raised \$27 million combined for negative ads, plus a few treacly positive ones. One prof says Franken's spending too much raising cash; Frankenfolk say they're building a broad donor base that's re-tappable in October.

The Strib's Steve Brandt offers a rather jolly look at ex-Minneapolis City Councilmember Dean Zimmermann's return from prison. Z's 55-pound-weight loss is celebrated; he was a "relentless rat-catcher in the prison kitchen," and the family has pondered his return to politics. Zimmermann was convicted of illicitly taking

developer cash. He's a jovial and unpretentious guy — returning to handyman work — but some Strib commenters think much more finger-wagging was needed.

AP's Brian Bakst notes that a builder tarred in the 35W bridge collapse is helping finish the replacement. It was Progressive Contracting's materials on the bridge when it collapsed; MnDOT's new commissioner has questioned PCI's load-placement, though other causes were definitely present. Archly, a lawyer for bridge victims says he's happy PCI is paving and installing highway barriers because profits he'll attach the \$3.6 million contract if he wins a lawsuit. PCI could still sue the state.

I tend to ignore Pawlenty-for-veep stories because they are so numerous and so few advance the ball. But the PiPress's Bill Salisbury unearths an interesting tidbit: the guy says the McCain campaign isn't vetting him. They haven't asked him for docs. An elaborate feint? Who knows? But this is a very nuts-and-bolts indicator, so kudos to Political Animal.

On the RNC protest beat, the PiPress's Emily Gurnon says Ramsey County courts are planning round-the-clock schedules if arrests are massive. The accused will be hauled to Maplewood; there would be no pretrial hearings. "One judge said, 'Put me down for the midnight shift,'" the county's chief jurist recounts. Costs are harder to figure; judges don't get overtime, but court personnel do.

The PiPress's Tom Webb writes that local corporations have kicked in 60 percent of the GOP convention funds — more than the 50/50 national split. Even so, money wrangler Stanley Hubbard complains that "Corporate Minnesota" wasn't more generous; some locals grumble about the ambitious \$58 million fundraising goal. Webb says "not a single" local company mentioned partisan

politics, but all have federal interests. Minnesota Independent ran a great piece on the subject two weeks ago.

At Politics in Minnesota, Sarah Janecek asserts that daily newspaper editorials no longer influence state politics. Disclaimer: I apparently ignited this with something I wrote Monday. Then there was a kerfuffle (see comments), and people reacted. Janecek backs me, but all journalists must face her question: Do we make any difference? Janecek times the influence wane to 2005, and blames the editorials' unsigned nature, plus more alternatives. She wants to know if people agree, and that's a discussion to watch.

Perhaps trying to prove Janecek wrong, Strib outdoors curmudgeon Dennis Anderson slams a ballyhooed statewide conservation/preservation plan because it "fails to lay bare the most fundamental, and politically dicey, obstacles needed to be overcome before meaningful conservation progress can occur." These are Minnesotans' "unchecked avarice" for profiteering ahead of conservation, and no leadership. It won't change until people vote for conservators over profiteers, Anderson asserts, repeating a pet theme.

Target's miniscule June same-story sales gain is a "cause for celebration" in a tough economy, writes Finance & Commerce's Kendall Anderson. The 0.4 percent jump badly trails Wal-Mart's 5.8 percent surge. Big Blue has more essentials than Big Red, Anderson notes. Rebate checks helped. Meanwhile, the PiPress's Gita Sitaramiah says Best Buy is threatened by Wal-Mart's incursion into flat-panel TVs, according to analysts.

A national ADHD conference opens today in Minneapolis, the PiPress's Jeremy Olson notes. No long speeches, I hope! (Sorry.) The focus is on dads with ADHD; they're less likely to earn college degrees and succeed in jobs or

marriage. The problem isn't inattention, one sufferer notes — sometimes, ADHD focuses you so much on one task you can't stop thinking about it, thus ignoring your family. Coping techniques will be discussed. Around 400 people are expected.

Zing! In a Strib letter, the state's revenue commissioner says Minneapolis tax officials threatened him with an "unflattering story" — like one that ran in the Strib two days ago. City leaders have ripped the state for requiring property-tax hikes in two neighborhoods; the state's Ward Einess says they wouldn't cough up the data and have to play by everyone else's rules.

Finance & Commerce's Brian Johnson says mad Mall of America-area hotel owners may form a political action committee and hire lobbyists to fight new lodging/entertainment taxes. They'll bang on the city of Bloomington, to whom the legislature handed the Mall subsidy hot potato.

Suddenly controversial Otter Tail Power won a 2.9 percent electrical-rate increase, the western Minnesota provider's first in a decade, the Strib's H.J. Cummins writes. That's less than half what the Big Stone II power plant promoter wanted. A key moment: whether the Public Utilities Commission would require rate lowering if a whistleblower's accounting-irregularity charge is confirmed. Commissioners declined, but noted they could cut rates later if problems are verified.

Nort spews: For a numbers geek, baseball is a lovely game. So try this: yesterday afternoon, Justin Morneau beat the Tigers with his fifth hit, an 11th-inning homer. A few hours later, the Marlins' Hanley Ramirez beat the Dodgers with his fifth hit, an 11th-inning homer. The Twins are now two-and-a-half back of Chicago.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Reader Roundup: More events best forgotten, and other comments

Even during a holiday week, lots of MinnPost readers found time to comment on topics ranging from offshore oil drilling to the Chinese Olympics, Iran, Iraq - and offered a slew of nominations for 150 Minnesota moments to forget.

More than 20 readers posted additions to MinnPost's three-part series, "150 Minnesota moments we'd just as soon forget," July 2-4. Here's a sampling:

From Patrick Coleman:

Thanks for the fun idea, MinnPost, although too many of the sports moments seem trivial to me. How 'bout the 1890 Sea Wing disaster on Lake Pepin? Almost 100 people died when an excursion boat flipped. I would also nominate two dirty political campaigns as moments to forget: the red baiting and anti-Semitic 1938 gubernatorial race between Elmer Benson and Harold Stassen, and the phony charge in 1962 by Karl Rolvaag against Elmer L. Andersen involving work being done on Highway 35.

From Susan Lesch:

1971: Harry Davis agreed to run for mayor of Minneapolis. His family was threatened daily. The police department guarded their home. The FBI loaned them guard dogs. Better to remember than forget this.

1869-1870: Tunnel construction under Saint Anthony Falls collapsed. The recovery effort may have saved Minneapolis industry including its mills but it also changed what was the only natural major waterfall on the Mississippi River into man-made or artificial waterfalls.

From Steve Elkins:

How about the 1987 "Super

Storm" that left much of the south metro literally underwater? I remember trying to get out of my "Prestigious West Bloomington" neighborhood the morning after, only find a cabin cruiser floating over East Bush Lake Road at I-494. And I think you missed the Herschel Walker trade.

••••

Jacob Taintor had this to say about Ron Way's Wednesday post, "Lifting drilling ban wouldn't do much for gas prices, report says":

I think it's obvious that the efforts that Rep. Bachmann and other supporters of lifting the off-shore drilling ban have more to do with campaigning than logic. In report after report, and news story after news story, it has been stated time and time again that opening off-shore drilling will not solve the fuel problem. If anything, it only serves to perpetuate it, giving people false hope that their 45-minute commute in the family SUV will soon be cheaper.

While I do believe that many off-shore drilling supporters - especially those who are up for re-election this fall - understand these numerous reports about the (lack of) results this plan would yield, I fear that legislators like Bachmann will make good on their promise to voters and actually go through with this ridiculous scheme.

Sherry Gunelson added:

Bachman has never been about logic. In fact she may view logic as a challenge to her faith.

The off-shore drilling crowd is all about politics. No logic required.

Thomas Swift disagreed:

Citing a report published by a think tank that is funded by leftist lunatic George Soros' "Open

Society Institute" to make an argument that flies in the face of every economist 101 college course?

I just knew this was going to be amusing.

I especially enjoyed the list of outrageously high gas prices EU citizens pay - sans the small detail that well more than half the price cited are due to the outrageously high taxes that are levied by the countries in which the fuel is sold.

You sir, have done yeoman's work to bolster Rep. Bachmann's credibility on this subject.

Reggie McGurt responded:

Thomas Swift said, "Citing a report published by a think tank that is funded by leftist lunatic George Soros' "Open Society Institute" to make an argument that flies in the face of every economist 101 college course."

Typical conservative knee-jerk response: attack the source, ignore the argument.

Your comment reminds me of the cliché: those who state, "it's economics 101" have never taken it. Anyone who has taken a basic micro-economics class would know that as Ron Way writes, a tiny boost in supply will do almost nothing for the price at the pump. Folks who support this are purely playing politics.

••••

Adam Minter commented on Jay Weiner's July 3 essay, "Our national birthday offers a good time to reflect on another nation's coming 'glory days'":

I met and spoke with [University of Minnesota professor Doug Hartmann] on his first trip to China last year. He's a thoughtful guy, and I respect his opinion. That noted, why not ask a Chinese person for their opinion on the Olympics? You know,

somebody who grew up there, lives there, and might be able to offer a perspective that Minnesotans don't ordinarily hear.

What I find disappointing — and disturbing — about MinnPost's ongoing coverage of the Olympics is that Weiner seems uninterested in getting the Chinese side of issues. From the tone of the Hartmann interview, it strikes me that he's falling to the old journalistic trap of believing that Chinese people have all been brainwashed, and thus the only relevant viewpoint is one offered by an outsider.

But this is silly. I've spent the last five years in Shanghai, and I can assure you that not only is there a broad range of opinion and outlook on the Olympics, but that it might surprise MinnPost readers with its subtlety. Why not allow a Chinese person to defend their patriotism and outlook on the games, instead of just letting Weiner and Hartmann take superior-sounding potshots at it? Has Weiner spoken to any Chinese people? There's a large Chinese population at the U of M — why not run a lengthy interview with one of them?

As for the chanting of "Go China," the Chinese is "Zhong guo, jia you" — which literally means "Add fuel, China." It's a difficult translation, but — in the context of the earthquake — it's a matter of encouragement. ...

It is by no means equivalent to a blind chant of USA USA! It's probably worth noting, too, that there are very significant cultural differences in the why and how of mass actions in China, and the US. In China, where the individual is commonly expected to defer to the group, the concept of rallying around China in a time of need is nothing special or new. And it certainly isn't a sign of a resurgent nationalism.