

CUSHIONS AND ANTI-SEMITISM

What's the difference between a "depression" and a "recession?"

Well, at the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the policy makers started to call it a recession but then decided that sounded too drastic. In general language, recession means going backwards, while a depression is just a hollow in an otherwise level surface. So depression seemed a milder term and was used for that reason.

The two economic terms have taken on a different significance because that depression turned out to be a deep pit rather than a hollow. Now recession is used as the milder term.

But word games aside, what is the difference between the America of the 1930s and of the 1980s? The human distress is not as widespread at this point. It is not just that the unemployment rate was more than twice as high as it is today. But in those days, unemployment more often applied to the *sole* breadwinner in the family. Today, with so many more women in the labor force, there still may be one employed breadwinner left in the family.

But, more significantly, when the Great Depression hit, there was no unemployment insurance, no social security, no food stamps, no special public job programs. There were soup kitchens, at best. The existence of that system of economic cushions during a "hollow" period such as this makes a monumental difference -- for human lives *and* for the society.

This system of economic cushions probably does not solve fundamental economic problems. The Great Depression really did not end until private enterprise recovered. That will probably be the case today. But because of these economic cushions, many families will be able to survive until that general recovery takes place.

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At the same time, our political society will be able to survive until that basic recovery takes place. In the 1930s, the American society was falling apart in many ways that we are not seeing now. One of the signals was the existence of massive anti-semitic movements built on blaming the Jews for the depression. One such anti-semite had millions of followers.

There is no hint of such a phenomenon today. The anti-semites are more often building their case around Israel -- and even they won't get very far unless Weinberger succeeds in convincing everyone that a state of war exists between Israel and the U.S. In any case, there is currently no mass extremist movement in this country built around economic distress. That is a major difference between the economically depressed America of the 1930s and that of the 1980s.

And a major reason for the difference is the existence of those economic cushions. Indeed, we may need more of them to cushion the shock. There may be abuses, and those need to be addressed. And there may be a conflict at times between the costly system of economic cushions and the need for a fundamental economic recovery. But if we're going to take a risk on that score, we have to take it on the side of adequate economic cushions. Otherwise, the political flavor of the 1930s could well return.

If *that* isn't a "Jewish Issue," then there is none.