

Of Supply And Demand

Why do stores start Christmas before Thanksgiving?

In six true-but-true words: because the store is always right.

Customers who complain about "commercializing Christmas" expect what they want when they want it. Their demands, like those of other consumers, are suppliers' Christmas in November is the law of supply and demand at work.

The same law that has employees of department stores working all morning to provide Sunday buffets to churchgoers who complain about adulteration of the Sabbath. The same law that keeps service stations open all hours.

So let's agree: the goods-and-service sector of our society merely reflects the values, preferences and priorities of our society.

Last week, the N.C. Retail Merchants Association distributed reprints of Christmas-before-Thanksgiving thoughts expressed by the Lancaster New Era, a Pennsylvania trade publication, in mid-November 1983. Not much of the rationale has changed: —Every successful store directs its best

efforts toward providing the best possible service to its customers. Customers ask stores to help them get shop early, and stores respond by bringing out their Christmas merchandise and displays early.

—Few stores could cope with customer traffic if all waited until December to make Christmas merchandise available. Procrastinators and normal people who prefer to Christmas shop nearer Christmas still strain shops to their capacity during the peak season.

—The same reasoning applies to "early Santas." If all the Santas waited until mid-December to start their personal appearances there would be thousands of children left over at the end of all the Santas.

There's no chicken-or-egg question here. Commerce did not create Christmas as we know it. Christmas as we want it created Christmas commerce. In sum, at Christmas, as at all other times in a democratic society, the people get what they deserve because they get what they demand.

Everything Voters Want To Know

The Christian Science Monitor

For 1988, voters will have more information about the candidates now in the race, six in each party, than ever before in history. Newspapers are running profiles, analyses of candidates' positions on the issues; television is airing interviews, forums, debates. The media are generally focusing on the background as the candidates scurry about the country like ants in search of the elusive scent of momentum.

To end up uninformed about the 1988 contestants, voters would deliberately have to close eyes and ears.

We caught up with the Democrats the other afternoon in New Hampshire, to listen to their pitches firsthand. They addressed a tumultuous state Democratic Party convention, replete with placards and demonstrations on the St. Anselm College gymnasium floor, as if to intimate what the real thing would be like for their man next summer in Atlanta, the entire nation watching.

New Hampshire, the first primary, is important, but not necessarily all that important. It is one of a number of potentially decisive settings for a race that is, in any meaningful way, yet to be run.

We did observe that the one candidate who brought the whole house to its feet — his rivals' supporters as well as his own — was Jesse Jackson. Not that the Rev. Mr. Jackson was positioning himself. ("I want to win in 1988," he said. "But the Democrats must win.") Still, Jackson most spoke from the heart about those whom the BWG of material progress have left behind; he promised to go to the sites of national and world tension where a leader personally might make a difference. Now, Jackson persistently leads in the nationwide polls. He is the best-known Democrat running. And yet he is routinely accorded no chance of winning. His superior rhetorical gift evidently only adds to the ironies of his candidacy.

After Jackson, the oratorical ratings would go like this: Albert Gore (most

resolutely presidential), Richard Georhardt (best prepared on issues), Bruce Babbitt (if there was a nice-guy award, he and his workers would be in the running), Michael Dukakis (who kept stressing that his campaign was nationwide, not just regional — presumably a point of limited interest to the New Hampshire politicians), and Paul Simon (a remarkably sustained singsong cadence).

Granted, supporters and voters respond to candidate qualities other than platform gifts — at times even despite a platform gift. Eisenhower and Truman were often at their worst in formal speeches; Adlai Stevenson and Hubert Humphrey, superb orators, could not win the presidency.

It is still curious that seeing in person the hottest candidates at the moment, Mr. Simon No. 1 in Iowa and Mr. Dukakis in New Hampshire, may give little clue to what is happening in their campaigns. Simon, for example, is said to be attracting support from Lutherans, who have not had a presidential candidate of such promise.

Other current evidence, such as polls, may be equally misleading. Surveys that purportedly show Dukakis's strength dropping from the 50 percent to the 30 percent range in New Hampshire over a week or two cannot be measuring anything substantial. And what is to be said of the phantom candidates like Mario Cuomo who regularly outdraw those actually in the field?

On the Republican side, George Bush continues to lead Robert Dole by more than 2 to 1 nationwide, Pat Robertson by almost 6 to 1 in the Gallup poll. If Mr. Dole were to win in Iowa, Mr. Bush might quickly find his support the proverbial mile wide and an inch deep. In California Bush does better than Dole among Republicans, but Dole does better against Democrats.

Again, voters genuinely interested in their leadership will have a chance to find out all they want to know about the 1988 contenders, if they take the trouble to read, follow TV, or drive a few miles to see them when they're in their own neck of the woods.

Social Security Is On The Table

From the Philadelphia Inquirer

A mediocre result from the budget summit was nearly certain once Rep. Claude Pepper, D-Fla., sounded his standard fury against any change in Social Security. To hear him and his allies tell it, the budget negotiators must have been able to annex retirees' homes and steal their life savings. Actually, the proposal at hand was minimal: a three-month delay in cost-of-living increases, but it generated enough outcry that budget negotiators gave in to the demand that Social Security recipients be exempt from plans for cutting the deficit.

Social Security kept finding its way onto the bargaining table because that's where the money is. With one-fifth of all federal spending in this program — a cool \$217 billion in 1988 — to leave it off-limits makes serious deficit reduction virtually impossible. That's why negotiators mentioned "the unmentionable," the idea of shaving Social Security costs by several billion dollars as part of a deficit-cutting package.

It's not just that Social Security is a big target. It's also a fair target. The simple truth is that retirees collect a lot more than they

paid into the system, and not all of them need the money.

Suppose all the money that this year's average retirees paid toward Social Security over the years had been saved separately and had earned the same interest that Treasury securities were paying. The resulting \$32,451 nest egg would provide that person what Social Security does — a \$593 a month — for just five years. Yet the average 65-year-old man today will collect those payments for 15 years, the average woman for 19.

In this light, what the budget negotiators were considering — a three-month delay on a \$21-billion increase for the average recipient — looks mild. While the government would have saved \$2 billion, the beneficiaries still would have ended up with their full 4.2 percent cost-of-living increases.

The best way to make Social Security a part of federal belt-tightening is to extend a policy begun in 1983.

Since then, people with substantial other income have had to pay tax on as much as half of their Social Security benefits. In the case of couples, the tax kicks in only if total income, counting 50 percent of Social Security benefits, adds up to more than \$32,000. By keeping that formula, but taxing all Social Security benefits as ordinary income, the government could raise between \$3 billion and \$4 billion a year.

Despite all the huffing about the separateness of Social Security, it is an integral part of the overall deficit problem. Restraining benefits — or taxing them — can help move the government away from fiscal disaster.

In turn, keeping the program sacrosanct unfairly limits the government's options. Many elderly Americans understand this better than their self-styled defenders.

From Where I Sit

By Johnny Morrow

After the hurt and fear comes the bitterness. At least, this is the thought that prevailed my mind while reading just one section of today's Charlotte Observer. I immediately tossed the rest of the paper aside. The news couldn't be all bad, surely, but I didn't feel like wading through the remainder to get to what little bit of good that was left. Tragedy, grief and anger seem to always travel in the same pack, feeding off each other for strength. And the newspaper was chock-full of such examples, each wrought with deep, tried-and-true emotions.

Consider the crash of Continental Flight 1713 at Denver's Stapleton International Airport. A federal investigator has disputed Continental Airlines' assertion that the plane, which crashed in a snowstorm, had been de-iced within 20 minutes of takeoff. Jim Burnett, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said at a news conference that preliminary investigation indicated the de-icing occurred 23 minutes before the plane was cleared for takeoff. He wouldn't comment on whether the time between de-icing and takeoff was too long, saying the investigation was incomplete. De-icing is done with a chemical spray by trained crews.

Earlier, Continental spokesman Bruce Hicks said the plane was de-iced within 20 minutes of takeoff, in keeping with the airline's standard procedure. Hicks said that Continental policy requires the cockpit crew to make an inspection every 20 minutes after de-icing to see if more is needed. Every indication is that the procedure was followed accordingly. There has been speculation that the pilot's inexperience may have caused the crash. At this stage, all involved parties are looking for a scapegoat, someone — anyone — on whom blame can be placed.

An aeronautics professor who helped design the DC9, the type of plane that crashed, said ice could definitely be a prime suspect. Burnett said that it was too early to rule out any causes. Flight 1713 rolled sharply back and forth just after liftoff. The plane caught a wingtip, flipped onto its back and broke into three pieces as it slid down the runway. Richard Shevell, a Stanford University aeronautics professor who worked on the DC9's design in the early 1960s, strongly suspects that there was ice on the wing, judging from the way the plane reacted.

Investigators are also looking at snowy runway conditions, possible engine failure, wind shear and other factors, according to Bob Sheldon of the Federal Aviation Administration. Ice buildup on the DC9 Series 10, the same model as the plane in the crash, was a factor in the crash of a cargo plane at Philadelphia International Airport on Feb. 5, 1985, as stated in an NTSB report. The report said that the planes are not equipped with slats on the front edge of the wings to give added lift.

The report said: "Aircraft without leading edge devices are more sensitive to even light amounts of ice, which may not always be visibly detectable and which may accumulate during pre-takeoff taxi operations." Don Hanson, a spokesman for manufacturer McDonnell Douglas, said 22 DC9 Series 10s are in service. The company built more than 170 in the late 1980s and early 1970s, and added slats and other devices to later models. Hanson stressed that the

DC9 is a good airplane and has been in service for a long time, and it is too early to connect the Denver crash with the Philadelphia crash.

Hicks said that the last routine maintenance check was completed on Oct. 27, and the plane had logged only 126 hours since then. The runway was eight of an inch above water level and about an inch above acceptable levels. And so, from listening to the experts, there appears to be no reason for the crash. Yet, at this writing, 27 of the 82 persons aboard Flight 1713 were killed. Five of the survivors are still in critical condition. I feel it is safe to say that a mistake was made somewhere along the line.

Trapped upside down in the jetliner's crushed cabin for nearly two hours, Tom Allegrezza found reason to be thankful. He saw his daughter and a friend crawl past broken bodies and twisted wreckage to safety. But he also had reason to fear for his life, because as he waited for a stream of jet fuel soaked him. He suffered hypothermia, a shattered finger and burns on his arm and shoulder. He was treated and released from a Colorado hospital. Mr. Allegrezza got out of the crash alive, but he felt bad for those who didn't.

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