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Remarks by Governor Ben S. Bernanke

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On Milton Friedman's Ninetieth Birthday

I can think of no greater honor than being invited to speak on the occasion of Milton Friedman's ninetieth birthday. Among ec Friedman has no peer. His seminal contributions to economics are legion, including his development of the permanent-income spending, his paradigm-shifting research in monetary economics, and his stimulating and original essays on economic history Generations of graduate students, at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, have benefited from his insight; and many of the children and grandchildren continue to this day to extend the sway of Friedman's ideas in economics. What is more, Milton Fr broader public opinion, exercised through his popular writings, speaking, and television appearances, has been at least as imposite impact on academic thought. In his humane and engaging way, Milton Friedman has conveyed to millions an understandin benefits of free, competitive markets, as well as the close connection that economic freedoms such as property rights and freedother types of liberty.

Today I'd like to honor Milton Friedman by talking about one of his greatest contributions to economics, made in close collabdistinguished coauthor, Anna J. Schwartz. This achievement is nothing less than to provide what has become the leading and a explanation of the worst economic disaster in American history, the onset of the Great Depression--or, as Friedman and Schwartz did not set out to solve this complex and important proble rather addressed it as part of a larger project, their magisterial monetary history of the United States (Friedman and Schwartz, aside, I note that I first read *A Monetary History of the United States* early in my graduate school years at M.I.T. I was hooked student of monetary economics and economic history ever since. I I think many others have had that experience, with the resul indirect influences of the *Monetary History* on contemporary monetary economics would be difficult to overstate.

As everyone here knows, in their *Monetary History* Friedman and Schwartz made the case that the economic collapse of 1929 the nation's monetary mechanism gone wrong. Contradicting the received wisdom at the time that they wrote, which held that player in the events of the 1930s, Friedman and Schwartz argued that "the contraction is in fact a tragic testimonial to the importance [p. 300; all page references refer to Friedman and Schwartz, 1963]."

Friedman and Schwartz's account of the Great Contraction is impressive in its erudition and development of historical detail, i many previously untapped primary sources. But what is most important about the work, and the reason that the book is as inflies the authors' subtle use of history to disentangle complicated skeins of cause and effect—to solve what economists call the *idi*. A statistician studying data from the Great Depression would notice the basic fact that the money stock, output, and prices in t down together in 1929 through 1933 and up together in subsequent years. But these correlations cannot answer the crucial que causing what? Are changes in the money stock largely causing changes in prices and output, as Friedman and Schwartz were t instead, is the stock of money reacting passively to changes in the state of economy? Or is there yet some other, unmeasured f all three variables?

The special genius of the *Monetary History* is the authors' use of what some today would call "natural experiments"—in this co which money moves for reasons that are plausibly unrelated to the current state of the economy. By locating such episodes, the subsequently occurred in the economy, Friedman and Schwartz laboriously built the case that the causality can be interpreted as the causality can be causalit

from money to output and prices, so that the Great Depression can reasonably be described as having been caused by monetar natural experiments are never perfectly controlled, so that no single natural experiment can be viewed as dispositive--hence th Friedman and Schwartz's historical analysis, which adduces a wide variety of such episodes and comparisons in support of the most useful thing I can do in the remainder of my talk today is to remind you of the genius of the Friedman-Schwartz methods some of their main examples and describing how they have held up in subsequent research.

Four Monetary Policy Episodes

To reiterate, at the heart of Friedman and Schwartz's identification strategy is the examination of historical periods in the atten in the money stock or in monetary policy that occurred for reasons largely unrelated to the contemporaneous behavior of outprextent that these monetary changes can reasonably be construed as "exogenous," one can interpret the response of the econom reflecting cause and effect--particularly if a similar pattern is found again and again.

For the early Depression era, Friedman and Schwartz identified at least four distinct episodes that seem to meet these criteria. of policy; one is a loosening. In each case, the economy responded in the way that the monetary theory of the Great Depressio discuss each of these episodes briefly, both because they nicely illustrate the Friedman-Schwartz method and because they are themselves.

The first episode analyzed by Friedman and Schwartz was the deliberate tightening of monetary policy that began in the spring continued until the stock market crash of October 1929. This policy tightening occurred in conditions that we would not today conducive to tighter money: As Friedman and Schwartz noted, the business-cycle trough had only just been reached at the end official trough date is November 1927), commodity prices were declining, and there was not the slightest hint of inflation. We Federal Reserve tighten in early 1928? A principal reason was the Board's ongoing concern about speculation on Wall Street. had long made the distinction between "productive" and "speculative" uses of credit, and the rising stock market and the assoc bank loans to brokers were thus a major concern. Benjamin Strong, the influential Governor of the Federal Reserve Bank of Protagonist in Friedman and Schwartz's narrative, had strong reservations about using monetary policy to try to arrest the stock Unfortunately, Strong was afflicted by chronic tuberculosis; his health was declining severely in 1928 (he died in October) and in the Federal Reserve System.

The "antispeculative" policy tightening of 1928-29 was affected to some degree by the developing feud between Strong's succ Fed, George Harrison, and members of the Federal Reserve Board in Washington. In particular, the two sides disagreed on the restraining brokers' loans: The Board favored so-called "direct action," essentially a program of moral suasion, while Harrison increases in the discount rate (that is, the policy rate) would be effective. This debate was resolved in Harrison's favor in 1929 dropped in favor of a further rate increase. Despite this sideshow and its effects on the timing of policy actions, it would be incontary policy was not tight during the dispute between Washington and New York. As Friedman and Schwartz noted (p. 28 the discount rate had been raised in New York to 5 per cent, the highest since 1921, and the System's holdings of government reduced to a level of over \$600 million at the end of 1927 to \$210 million by August 1928, despite an outflow of gold." Hence a tightening in monetary policy not related to the current state of output and prices--a monetary policy "innovation," in today's

Moreover, Friedman and Schwartz went on to point out that this tightening of policy was followed by falling prices and weak "During the two months from the cyclical peak in August 1929 to the crash, production, wholesale prices, and personal incom 20 per cent, 7-1/2 per cent, and 5 per cent, respectively." Of course, once the crash occurred in October--the result, many study surmised, of a slowing economy as much as any fundamental overvaluation--the economic decline became even more precipit case that money was quite tight as early as the spring of 1928 has been strengthened by the subsequent work of James Hamiltonian showed that the Fed's desire to slow outflows of U.S. gold to France--which under the leadership of Henri Poincaré had recent economy, thereby attracting massive flows of gold from abroad--further tightened U.S. monetary policy.

The next episode studied by Friedman and Schwartz, another tightening, occurred in September 1931, following the sterling c wave of speculative attacks on the pound forced Great Britain to leave the gold standard. Anticipating that the United States m leave gold, speculators turned their attention from the pound to the dollar. Central banks and private investors converted a sub dollar assets to gold in September and October of 1931. The resulting outflow of gold reserves (an "external drain") also put p banking system (an "internal drain"), as foreigners liquidated dollar deposits and domestic depositors withdrew cash in anticip bank failures. Conventional and long-established central banking practice would have mandated responses to both the external but the Federal Reserve-by this point having forsworn any responsibility for the U.S. banking system, as I will discuss later-only to the external drain. As Friedman and Schwarz wrote, "The Federal Reserve System reacted vigorously and promptly to

On October 9 [1931], the Reserve Bank of New York raised its rediscount rate to 2-1/2 per cent, and on October 16, to 3-1/2 prise within so brief a period in the whole history of the System, before or since (p. 317)." This action stemmed the outflow of a what Friedman and Schwartz called a "spectacular" increase in bank failures and bank runs, with 522 commercial banks closif October alone. The policy tightening and the ongoing collapse of the banking system caused the money supply to fall precipite in output and prices became even more virulent. Again, the logic is that a monetary policy change related to objectives other the economy—in this case, defense of the dollar against external attack—were followed by changes in domestic output and prices is direction.

One might object that the two "experiments" described so far were both episodes of monetary contraction. Hence, although the declining output and prices followed these tight-money policies, the evidence is perhaps not entirely persuasive. The possibility Great Depression occurred for other reasons and that the contractionary monetary policies merely coincided with (or perhaps, ongoing declines in the economy. Hence it is particularly interesting that the third episode studied by Friedman and Schwartz episode.

This third episode occurred in April 1932, when the Congress began to exert considerable pressure on the Fed to ease monetar to conduct large-scale open-market purchases of securities. The Board was quite reluctant; but between April and June 1932, i substantial purchases. This infusion of liquidity appreciably slowed the decline in the stock of money and significantly brough government bonds, corporate bonds, and commercial paper. Most interesting, as Friedman and Schwartz noted (p. 324), "[t]he decline in the stock of money and the beginning of the purchase program were followed shortly by an equally notable change economic indicator. . . . Wholesale prices started rising in July, production in August. Personal income continued to fall but at Factory employment, railroad ton-miles, and numerous other indicators of physical activity tell a similar story. All in all, as in again have many of the earmarks of a cyclical revival. . . . Burns and Mitchell (1946), although dating the trough in March 19′ as an example of a 'double bottom.' " Unfortunately, although a few Fed officials supported the open-market purchase program Harrison at the New York Fed, most did not consider the policy to be appropriate. In particular, as argued by several modern s mistaken view that low nominal interest rates were indicative of monetary ease. Hence, when the Congress adjourned on July essentially ended the program. By the latter part of the year, the economy had relapsed dramatically.

The final episode studied by Friedman and Schwartz, again contractionary in impact, occurred in the period from January 193 holiday in March. This time the exogenous factor might be taken to be the long lag mandated by the Constitution between the inauguration of a new U.S. President. Franklin D. Roosevelt, elected in November 1932, was not to take office until March 19 course, considerable speculation circulated about the new President's likely policies; the uncertainty was increased by the Pres make definite policy statements or to endorse actions proposed by the increasingly frustrated President Hoover. However, fror campaign statements and known propensities, many inferred (correctly) that Roosevelt might devalue the dollar or even break entirely. Fearing the resulting capital losses, both domestic and foreign investors began to convert dollars to gold, putting pres banking system and the gold reserves of the Federal Reserve System. Bank failures and the Fed's defensive measures against t reduced the stock of money. The economy took its deepest plunge between November 1932 and March 1933, once more conf sequence predicted by the monetary hypothesis. Once Roosevelt was sworn in, his declaration of a national bank holiday and, cutting the link between the dollar and gold initiated the expansion of money, prices, and output. It is an interesting but not un in economics that the expectation of a devaluation can be highly destabilizing but that the devaluation itself can be beneficial.

These four episodes might be considered as time series examples of Friedman and Schwartz's evidence for the role of monetar Depression. They are not the entirety of the evidence, however. Friedman and Schwartz also introduced "cross-sectional"--tha evidence as well. This cross-sectional evidence is based on differences in exchange-rate regimes across countries in the 1930s

The Gold Standard and the International Depression

Although the *Monetary History* focuses by design on events in the United States, some of its most compelling insights come f evidence. Anticipating a large academic literature of the 1980s and 1990s, Friedman and Schwartz recognized in 1963 that a c economic performances in the 1930s of countries with different monetary regimes could also serve as a test for their monetary

Facilitating the cross-sectional natural experiment was the fact that the international gold standard, which had been suspended was laboriously rebuilt during the 1920s (in a somewhat modified form called the gold-exchange standard). Countries that adl international gold standard were essentially required to maintain a fixed exchange rate with other gold-standard countries. Mo United States was the dominant economy on the gold standard during this period (with some competition from France), countries that add the control of t

gold standard were forced to match the contractionary monetary policies and price deflation being experienced in the United S

Importantly for identification purposes, however, the gold standard was not adhered to uniformly as the Depression proceeded historical or political reasons never joined the gold standard. Others were forced off early, because of factors such as internal I domestic banking conditions, and the local influence of competing economic doctrines. Other countries, notably France and the so-called Gold Bloc, had a strong ideological commitment to gold and therefore remained on the gold standard as long as I

Friedman and Schwartz's insight was that, if monetary contraction was in fact the source of economic depression, then countri by the gold standard to follow the United States into deflation should have suffered relatively more severe economic downturr conducting a formal statistical analysis, Friedman and Schwartz gave a number of salient examples to show that the more tigh country was by the gold standard (and, by default, the more closely bound to follow U.S. monetary policies), the more severe monetary contraction and its declines in prices and output. One can read their discussion as dividing countries into four category.

The first category consisted of countries that did not adhere to the gold standard at all or perhaps adhered only very briefly. The Friedman and Schwartz was China. As they wrote (p. 361), "China was on a silver rather than a gold standard. As a result, it he floating exchange rate with respect to gold-standard countries. A decline in the gold price of silver had the same effect as a deforeign exchange value of the Chinese yuan. The effect was to insulate Chinese internal economic conditions from the worldw And that is what happened. From 1929 to 1931, China was hardly affected internally by the holocaust that was sweeping the giust as in 1920-21, Germany had been insulated by her hyperinflation and associated floating exchange rate."

Subsequent research (for example, Choudhri and Kochin, 1980) has identified other countries that, like China, did not adhere and hence escaped the worst of the Depression. Two examples are Spain, where the internal instability that ultimately led to the prevented the country from re-adopting the gold standard in the 1920s, and Japan, which was forced from the gold standard af a matter of months. The Depression in Spain was quite mild, and Japan experienced a powerful recovery almost immediately a short-lived experiment with gold.

The second category consisted of countries that had restored the gold standard in the 1920s but abandoned it early in the Deprfall of 1931. As Friedman and Schwartz observed (p. 362), the first major country to leave the gold standard was Great Britair off gold in September 1931. Several trading partners, among them the Scandinavian countries, followed Britain's lead almost i effect of leaving gold was to free domestic monetary policy and to stop the monetary contraction. What was the consequence operation on the money stock? Friedman and Schwartz noted (p. 362) that "[t]he trough of the depression in Britain and the oth accompanied Britain in leaving gold was reached in the third quarter of 1932. [In contrast, i]n the countries that remained on t like Canada, that went only part way with Britain, the Depression dragged on."

Third were countries that remained on gold but had ample reserves or were attracting gold inflows. The key example was Frar leader of the Gold Bloc. After its stabilization in 1928, France attracted gold reserves well out of proportion to the size of its e inflows allowed it to maintain its money supply and avoid a serious downturn until 1932. However, at that point, France's liqu foreign exchange reserves and its banking problems began to offset the continuing gold inflows, reducing the French money stabilities and declines in output began in France, which, as Friedman and Schwartz pointed out, did not reach its trough until than Great Britain and other countries that left gold early.

Fourth, and perhaps the worst hit, were countries that rejoined the gold standard but had very low gold reserves and banking s weakened by World War I and the ensuing hyperinflations. Friedman and Schwartz mention Austria, Germany, Hungary, and of this category (p. 361). These countries suffered not only deflation but also extensive banking and financial crises, making the depression particularly precipitous.

The powerful identification achieved by this categorization of countries by Friedman and Schwartz is worth reemphasizing. If been the product primarily of nonmonetary forces, such as changes in autonomous spending or in productivity, then the nomir regime chosen by each country would have been largely irrelevant. The close connection among countries' exchange rate regin policies, and the behavior of domestic prices and output, is strong evidence for the proposition that monetary forces played a c the U.S. depression but in the world as a whole.

Of course, those familiar with more recent work on the Great Depression will recognize that Friedman and Schwartz's idea of

by exchange rate regime has been widely extended by subsequent researchers. Notably, in the paper that revived Friedman an temporarily dormant insight, Choudhri and Kochin (1980) considered the relative performances of Spain (which, as mentioned gold standard), three Scandinavian countries (which left gold with Great Britain in September 1931), and four countries that refrench-led Gold Bloc (the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and Poland). They found that the countries that remained on gold suffice severe contractions in output and prices than the countries leaving gold. In a highly influential paper, Eichengreen and Sachs (number of key macro variables for ten major countries over 1929-35, finding that countries that left gold earlier also recovered James (1991) confirmed the findings of Eichengreen and Sachs for a broader sample of twenty-four (mostly industrialized) conservations and Carey, 1996), and Campa (1990) did the same for a sample of Latin American countries. Bernanke (1995) show adherence to the gold standard predict deeper and more extended depression, as had been noted by earlier authors, but also that various key macro variables, such as real wages and real interest rates, differed across gold-standard and non-gold-standard cone would expect if the driving shocks were monetary in nature. The most detailed narrative discussion of how the gold standard Depression around the world is, of course, the influential book by Eichengreen (1992). Eichengreen (2002) reviews the concludes largely that they are quite compatible with the Friedman and Schwartz approach.

The Role of Bank Failures

Yet another striking feature of the Great Contraction in the United States was the massive extent of banking panics and failure Bank Holiday of March 1933, in which the entire U.S. banking system was shut down. During the Depression decade, someth U.S. commercial banks either failed or merged with other banks.

Friedman and Schwartz take the unusually severe and protracted U.S. banking panic as yet another opportunity to apply their methodology. Their argument, in short, is that under institutional arrangements that existed before the establishment of the Fed failures of the scale of those in 1929-33 would not have occurred, even in an economic downturn as severe as that in the Deprand institutional reasons to be detailed in a moment, however, the extraordinary spate of bank failures did occur and led in turn extinction of bank deposits and an abnormally large decline in the stock of money. Because the decline in money induced by I have occurred under previous regimes, Friedman and Schwartz argued, it can be treated as partially exogenous and thus a pote extraordinary declines in output and prices that followed.

Before the creation of the Federal Reserve, Friedman and Schwartz noted, bank panics were typically handled by banks thems through urban consortiums of private banks called clearinghouses. If a run on one or more banks in a city began, the clearingh suspension of payments, meaning that, temporarily, deposits would not be convertible into cash. Larger, stronger banks would first, in determining that the banks under attack were in fact fundamentally solvent, and second, in lending cash to those banks withdrawals. Though not an entirely satisfactory solution—the suspension of payments for several weeks was a significant hard the system of suspension of payments usually prevented local banking panics from spreading or persisting (Gorton and Mullir solvent banks had an incentive to participate in curing panics because they knew that an unchecked panic might ultimately the deposits.

It was in large part to improve the management of banking panics that the Federal Reserve was created in 1913. However, as I Schwartz discuss in some detail, in the early 1930s the Federal Reserve did not serve that function. The problem within the Fe doctrinal: Fed officials appeared to subscribe to Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon's infamous 'liquidationist' thesis, that were was a harsh but necessary prerequisite to the recovery of the banking system. Moreover, most of the failing banks were small what we would now call money-center banks) and not members of the Federal Reserve System. Thus the Fed saw no particula the panics. At the same time, the large banks--which would have intervened before the founding of the Fed--felt that protecting brethren was no longer their responsibility. Indeed, since the large banks felt confident that the Fed would protect them if neces of small competitors was a positive good, from their point of view.

In short, according to Friedman and Schwartz, because of institutional changes and misguided doctrines, the banking panics of Contraction were much more severe and widespread than would have normally occurred during a downturn. Bank failures and withdrawals greatly reduced the quantity of bank deposits, consequently reducing the money supply. The result, they argued, and output decline than would have otherwise occurred.

A couple of objections can be raised to the Friedman-Schwartz inference. One logical possibility is that the extraordinary rate 1930s, rather than causing the subsequent declines in output and prices, occurred because depositors and others *anticipated* the economy--that is, that the banking panics were endogenous to the expected state of the economy. Friedman and Schwartz's inspersuade me that this is unlikely. If previous arrangements had been in place, bank panics would not have been allowed to pro

they did, independent of the severity of the downturn. Moreover, I don't find it plausible that, in 1930 and 1931, depositors and anticipated the severity of the downturn still to come.

A second possibility is that banking panics contributed to the collapse of output and prices through nonmonetary mechanisms. (Bernanke, 1983) argued that the effective closing down of the banking system might have had an adverse impact by creating normal intermediation of credit, as well as by reducing the quantity of transactions media. Friedman and Schwartz anticipated adduced as contrary evidence a comparison of the United States and Canada (p. 352). They pointed out that (1) Canada's moneto that of the United States by a fixed exchange rate; (2) Canada had no significant bank failures; but (3) Canada's output declipated that Canada's economy declined because of its enforced moneta whether that monetary contraction took place through bank failures or was enforced by the exchange-rate regime was immater

I would argue that Canada, both being a commodity exporter and being unusually highly integrated with the United States, may representative of the experience of all countries in the 1930s. For example, in Bernanke (1995, table 3), I showed using a sample countries that, with the exchange-rate regime held constant, countries suffering severe banking panics had subsequent declines significantly worse than those in countries with stable banking systems. This result supports the possibility of an additional, not for bank failures. At the same time, my results were also strongly supportive of the view that adherence to the gold standard, a monetary contraction, was of first-order importance in explaining which countries suffered severe depressions. Thus, as I have clear, my argument for nonmonetary influences of bank failures is simply an embellishment of the Friedman-Schwartz story; is contradicts the basic logic of their analysis.

Benjamin Strong and the Leadership Vacuum

Finally, what is probably Friedman and Schwartz's most controversial "natural experiment" stems from the premature death, in preeminent central banker, Benjamin Strong. Strong, who was Governor of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and the de Fed Chairman today, had led the Federal Reserve throughout the 1920s. Aptly named, he had a strong personality and was a b Quite plausibly, his personality and skills created a leadership position within a Federal Reserve System that—as suggested by intended by the Congress to be a relatively decentralized institution.

After Strong's death, as Friedman and Schwartz describe in useful detail, the Federal Reserve no longer had an effective leade established chain of command. Members of the Board in Washington, jealous of the traditional powers of the Federal Reserve strove for greater influence; and Strong's successor, George Harrison, did not have the experience or personality to stop them. began to assert themselves more. Thus, power became diffused; worse, what power there was accrued to men who did not und banking from a national and international point of view, as Strong had. The leadership vacuum and the generally low level of expertise in the Federal Reserve System was a major problem that led to excessive passivity and many poor decisions by the F Strong's death.

Friedman and Schwartz argued in their book that if Strong had lived, many of the mistakes of the Great Depression would hav proposition has been highly controversial and has led to detailed examinations of what Strong's views "really were" on various policymaking. This counterfactual debate somewhat misses the point, in my opinion. We don't know what would have happen but what we do know is that the central bank of the world's economically most important nation in 1929 was essentially leader expertise. This situation led to decisions, or nondecisions, which might well not have occurred under either better leadership o institutional structure. And associated with these decisions, we observe a massive collapse of money, prices, and output. Thus the death of Strong does qualify as one more natural experiment with which to try to identify the effects of monetary forces in

Conclusion

The brilliance of Friedman and Schwartz's work on the Great Depression is not simply the texture of the discussion or the cohview. Their work was among the first to use history to address seriously the issues of cause and effect in a complex economic of identification. Perhaps no single one of their "natural experiments" alone is convincing; but together, and enhanced by the s dozens of scholars, they make a powerful case indeed.

For practical central bankers, among which I now count myself, Friedman and Schwartz's analysis leaves many lessons. What is the idea that monetary forces, particularly if unleashed in a destabilizing direction, can be extremely powerful. The best thin can do for the world is to avoid such crises by providing the economy with, in Milton Friedman's words, a "stable monetary be example as reflected in low and stable inflation.

Let me end my talk by abusing slightly my status as an official representative of the Federal Reserve. I would like to say to M Regarding the Great Depression. You're right, we did it. We're very sorry. But thanks to you, we won't do it again.

Best wishes for your next ninety years.

Endnotes

- 1. Accordingly, I hope the reader will forgive the many references to my own work in the list of references below. They arise own research has followed up leads from the Friedman-Schwartz agenda. Return to text
- 2. However, as Athanasios Orphanides pointed out to me, by 1929 the rate of output growth was strong, which may have prov motivation for a tightening. Return to text
- 3. Apparently the Board was not entirely clear on the point that funds used to purchase stock are not made unavailable for proas stock sales are merely transfers of existing assets, funds used to purchase stock are not dissipated but only transferred from Return to text

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