



Robert F. Kennedy on Defining GDP and Some Other Thoughts

Posted by [JoulesBurn](#) on June 10, 2008 - 10:00am

Topic: [Policy/Politics](#)

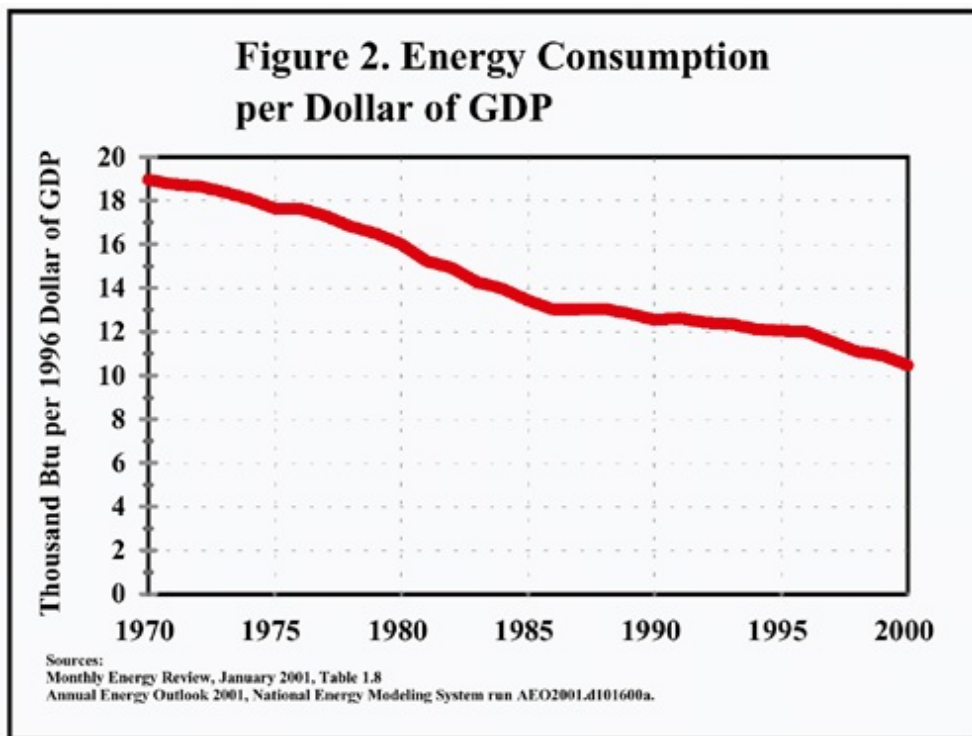
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A number of days ago, on a website of a particularly enlightened economist, I came across an excerpt from a speech given by Sen. Robert F. Kennedy on March 18, 1968, at the University of Kansas. He was on the campaign trail in the US 1968 presidential race, and that context makes these words even more amazing. Less than three months later, he was shot and killed in California. Embedded above is a video montage with words from the speech, and the text follows below.

"We will find neither national purpose nor personal satisfaction in a mere continuation of economic progress, in an endless amassing of worldly goods. We cannot measure national spirit by the Dow Jones Average, nor national achievement by the Gross National Product. For the Gross National Product includes air pollution, and ambulances to clear our highways from carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and jails for the people who break them. The Gross National Product includes the destruction of the redwoods and the death of Lake Superior. It grows with the production of napalm and missiles and nuclear warheads.... It includes... the broadcasting of television programs which glorify violence to sell goods to our children." And if the Gross National Product includes all this, there is much that it does not comprehend. It does not allow for the health of our families, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It is

indifferent to the decency of our factories and the safety of our streets alike. It does not include the beauty of our poetry, or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials... the Gross National Product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile, and it can tell us everything about America -- except whether we are proud to be Americans."

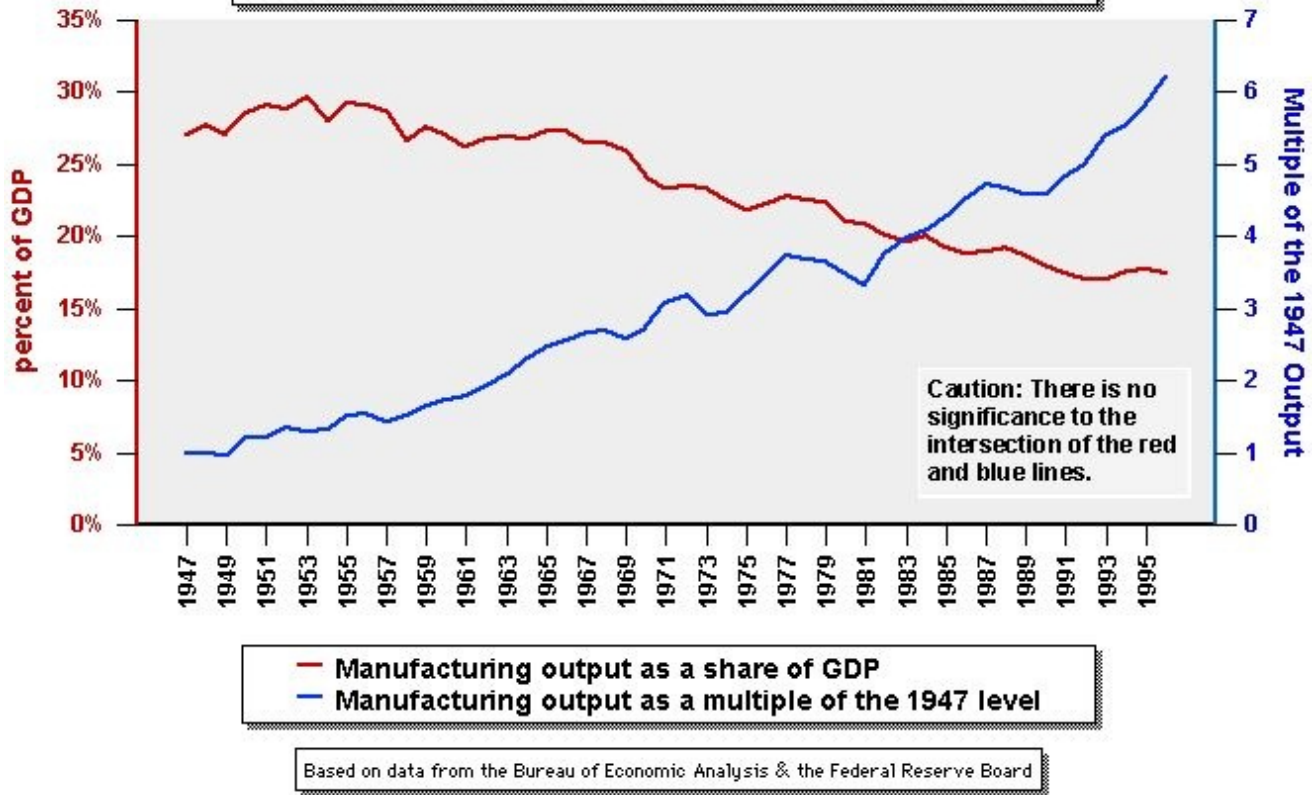
Amongst those who acknowledge the reality of Peak Oil, a number believe that we can continue (perhaps after a brief pause) to increase the energy input into the economy. Given the amount of solar energy available, this is certainly a theoretical possibility. Others believe that, while energy use might decrease, economic growth can continue because of efficiency gains and changes in the nature of the economy (from industrial to information). Data such as that shown below lend credence to this idea:



There are two flaws in this line of reasoning, the first being that this is data only for the US. Much of what is now consumed in the US is now manufactured in Asia. Thus, the energy consumption associated with that manufacturing doesn't show up on the US balance sheet.

The U.S. Manufacturing Sector, 1947-96

Relative Decline versus Absolute Expansion



The second flaw is the assumption that GDP (Gross Domestic Product), while being a measure of economic activity, accurately reflects the worth of the economy for the humans which take part in it. It certainly includes a number of things which provide questionable benefits for society.

In any event, Bobby Kennedy was shot and killed, my father voted for Nixon, and the rest is history.

Another speech by RFK, as read by his brother Ted, is presented below.

Finally, here in three parts is the speech given by RFK just before he was killed. Those who are still emotionally affected by this tragedy, as I discovered that I am (despite being only ten years of age when it happened), might stop watching when he concludes his victory speech.

- [Part I](#)
- [Part II](#)
- [Part III](#)



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