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Creating an American Innovation Agenda

Keeping the U.S. competitive through innovation requires action at the highest levels of corporate, academic, and governmental leadership

by [Harold J. Raveche](#)

The Presidential candidates have paid scant attention to the international decline of America's economy, and leaders already in government have paid even less, if that's possible.

Meanwhile, the U.S. economy is like a jet with its passengers comfortably watching a movie, seemingly unperturbed by the silence of the engines outside, the gradual loss of altitude, and the apparent indifference of the pilots up front. America, once home to the roaring engines of the world's postwar economy, has lost a lot of altitude, sinking to 24th in world economic outlook and stability.

But we can restart those engines and regain altitude if we snap to it and ask our national leaders to deal with it now. America, for the moment, has the most vital resource to make a resurgence: human capital. The co-ingredients are individual and political will.

If Americans themselves become more competitive, through the rigor and discipline of innovation, and if the country's leaders pilot the way following a national agenda, we will see measurable, sustainable gains in jobs and wealth and better opportunities to ward off competitive threats from abroad.

Overseas Progress

Strides are being made, but sadly, elsewhere on the planet. The global workforce is such that there are well-trained engineers, scientists, and accountants who know U.S. tax laws even better than our own professionals. Foreign attorneys, physicians, managers, and executives are willing to excel, knowing as much or more, and for less money and benefits. State-of-the-art, high-tech R&D centers are being established in India and China with PhDs from those countries. They get it. They understand that innovation is fueled by human capital to create something new or different, and they are applying innovation immediately to derive economic value.

The goal of economic competitiveness through innovation must be set at the highest levels of corporate, academic, and governmental leadership. These leaders must provide both the strategy and resources to back their positions.

Organizations must establish more than simply a "program" for innovation; they need an entire "mindset" for innovation. Incentives and rewards must be provided to encourage individuals and groups to pursue bold ideas that have transformational value. Training is necessary. Tax credits and matching funds from regional, state, and federal agencies, for organizations to use the services of the educational institution of their choice, will help ensure the pursuit of innovation.

National Priorities

By necessity, the fundamental innovation strategy must be multidimensional and must address national priorities to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to reap the rewards of a newly competitive economy. To do that, we must redirect our highly politicized national environment where Republicans are fearful of government strategy that engages the private sector and where Democrats see this as the occasion for social engineering. Such outdated predilections undermine a national agenda for innovation.

Because of pressing social, economic, and security issues, six functional areas require sustained, multibillion-dollar R&D investments to stimulate innovation in both universities and the private sector through collaborations and partnerships. The priorities are: health care, energy alternatives, the environment, public transportation, homeland security, and national defense.

U.S.-led innovation in these six sectors will help ensure better services and quality of life for all Americans while protecting our democracy. Equally important, innovation will lead to the growth of established businesses, the establishment of new ones, as well as the creation of more jobs and wealth. The role for innovation is to help domestic manufacturing companies be profitable while providing good-paying jobs at home with benefits. This requires executive talent and a cadre of engineers who excel in innovation as well as in their areas of professional specialization.

Incentives in Academia

Universities must develop incentives and rewards for faculty so that innovation becomes a core academic value along with teaching and research. Opportunities for students, from freshmen through doctoral candidates in engineering, science, and management, are essential to deepen the understanding of how the fruits of research can be rapidly transformed into tomorrow's products and services. Community colleges can develop innovation training programs for office workers as well as for K-12 school teachers in their regions.

Americans from all sectors joining together to improve our economic position speaks to the fundamental tenet of our democracy—citizens uniting to achieve an objective they could not realize on their own. In this way, the national agenda catalyzes a national purpose that is sadly missing in the U.S.

It is time now for leadership in academia, business, and government to promote a national innovation agenda. The next President of the U.S. and our next Congress must make this their No.1 priority. It will be their lasting legacy.

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