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**“Did History End in 1945?”**

Almost every day another survey is published reporting that more and more businesses simply cannot find enough workers with the requisite education for filling their current or future job openings. Projected profit losses to U.S. businesses range from \$300 billion by 2022 to over \$1 trillion by 2030 unless this imbalance between educational attainments and job requirements is corrected. So why aren't more American companies responding to this talent crisis by both expanding training and education for their employees and supporting career-education programs in their communities?

In his columns and recent books David Brooks cogently analyzes our nation's current social and cultural malaise. He finds a predominant culture in which past moral and social norms have been cast aside and everything is viewed through a “purely economic lens.” For corporations this means maximizing profit and the fraying of former norms of commitment to their employees, communities, and customers.

This shift in current corporate ethos only reflects a far broader set of societal and cultural changes that began in 1945 in response to the mass destruction of Europe during the First and Second World Wars. These tragic conflicts were fueled by monarchist or totalitarian ideologies that subjugated the individual to the state. Even in democratic nations, the all-encompassing mobilization required to marshal the resources to win the war demanded a soul-numbing level of citizen conformity and deprivation. In reaction, a postmodernist movement arose first in France founded on extreme individualism and rejection of the past “truths” provided by science, history, philosophy, ethics, and theology. Instead these thinkers preached that each individual must construct his/her own “truths” based on personal experience, i.e., your personal story. In other words, truth is deduced from what I experience. Thus history is useless; the future is undecided. Only today is important. The central focus is on self, forget what you owe to your community.

We are now witnessing the destructive power of postmodern ideology. Without any unifying ethical/moral compass, opinions proliferate and finding consensus on solutions to America's most pressing economic and social problems is proving more and more difficult. Also ignorance of America's past history means that lessons from the unique heritage of our nation's local community building are not being explored. Learning from America's past accomplishments can lead us out of postmodernism's festering swamp of warring tribalism

Lessons from the Past

Between 1890 and 1920, industrialization and the consequent growth of U.S. cities led to the disintegration of social structures and institutions. The impact of the new technologies of that time – electricity, assembly lines, automobiles, tractors, telephones, radios – were just as disruptive as those of today. It was the age of robber barons, swelling immigration, and the urban jungle resulting in economic upheaval and social unrest. As conditions eroded, new political movements arose across the ideological spectrum. But out of this ideological ferment, consensus was gradually built on funding public schooling to meet the education and skills demands of this new age.

Community, business, and political leaders came to see the links between supporting a new education-to-employment system and social progress. Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor, industrialists Henry Ford and Andrew Carnegie, inventor and scientist Thomas Edison, and politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson all joined together in supporting and building mandatory public education.

One of the singular achievements of this Progressive Era was the extension of public schooling throughout the nation. By 1918 all of the then 48 states mandated K-12 tax-supported, compulsory education enforced by truancy laws with teeth. This was revolutionary for its time. It encountered opposition in every state. The United States was well ahead of the rest of the world in adopting the first modern education-to-employment system! For example, the United Kingdom did not set up similar mandates until 1946 and Ireland in the 1980s.

Most historians agree that these decades also saw an unprecedented boom in association building. Americans of all classes and conditions created and joined a broad spectrum of voluntary organizations, most of which have endured to the present. These associations promoted a wide variety of causes – civic, religious, fraternal, ethnic, labor, business, professional, veterans – were among the most prominent. While some began at the national level, most were formed at the community level and then spread laterally to other communities. Ordinary people – amateurs – formed clubs and organizations that promoted self-help and civic engagement as popular debate about local issues became part of America's culture.

That was our economic and social revolution 100 years ago. We need to do it again!

#### Today's Mandate: Community Renewal

The extreme individualism of today's prevailing culture has seriously weakened the bonds of community in our nation both for individuals and for organizations. The focus is on pursuing one's economic self-interest divorced from social and moral norms. There is always tension between the needs of the individual and the needs of society. However, at present, our culture has overbalanced individual autonomy over social good.

The United States met the challenges posed by economic and technological change of the Industrial Revolution in the early 20th century through community activism and cooperation. We need to tap into these roots by again recognizing that moral values and social trust are essential components in this process.

A Regional Talent Innovation Network (RETAIN) provides a proven and important template for accomplishing this transition to a 21st-century society. Already 1,000 RETAINs exist across the United States. Scattered short-term fixes will not solve the skills-jobs disconnect. It is a systemic problem that requires cooperative action to reform the education-to-employment system. Support the local RETAIN in your community. If one does not exist, this is the time to start one.

America's future needs renewal. What are we waiting for? If you don't get engaged in this process, who will? History has not ended. It is in your hands to write the next chapter.

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