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We're No. 1(1)!

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Full Text:

I want to share a couple of articles I recently came across that, I believe, speak to the core of what ails America today but is too little discussed. The first was in Newsweek under the ironic headline "We're No. 11!" The piece, by Michael Hirsh, went on to say: "Has the United States lost its oomph as a superpower? Even President Obama isn't immune from the gloom. 'Americans won't settle for No. 2!' Obama shouted at one political rally in early August. How about No. 11? That's where the U.S.A. ranks in Newsweek's list of the 100 best countries in the world, not even in the top 10."

The second piece, which could have been called "Why We're No. 11," was by the Washington Post economics columnist Robert Samuelson. Why, he asked, have we spent so much money on school reform in America and have so little to show for it in terms of scalable solutions that produce better student test scores? Maybe, he answered, it is not just because of bad teachers, weak principals or selfish unions.

"The larger cause of failure is almost unmentionable: shrunken student motivation," wrote Samuelson. "Students, after all, have to do the work. If they aren't motivated, even capable teachers may fail. Motivation comes from many sources: curiosity and ambition; parental expectations; the desire to get into a 'good' college; inspiring or intimidating teachers; peer pressure. The unstated assumption of much school 'reform' is that if students aren't motivated, it's mainly the fault of schools and teachers." Wrong, he said. "Motivation is weak because more students (of all races and economic classes, let it be added) don't like school, don't work hard and don't do well. In a 2008 survey of public high school teachers, 21 percent judged student absenteeism a serious problem; 29 percent cited 'student apathy.' "

There is a lot to Samuelson's point -- and it is a microcosm of a larger problem we have not faced honestly as we have dug out of this recession: We had a values breakdown -- a national epidemic of get-rich-quickism and something-for-nothingism. Wall Street may have been dealing the dope, but our lawmakers encouraged it. And far too many of us were happy to buy the dot-com and subprime crack for quick prosperity highs.

Ask yourself: What made our Greatest Generation great? First, the problems they faced were huge, merciless and inescapable: the Depression, Nazism and Soviet Communism. Second, the Greatest Generation's leaders were never afraid to ask Americans to sacrifice. Third, that generation was ready to sacrifice, and pull together, for the good of the country. And fourth, because they were ready to do hard things, they earned global leadership the only way you can, by saying: "Follow me."

Contrast that with the Baby Boomer Generation. Our big problems are unfolding incrementally -- the decline in U.S. education, competitiveness and infrastructure, as well as oil addiction and climate change. Our generation's leaders never dare utter the word "sacrifice." All solutions must be painless. Which drug would you like? A stimulus from Democrats or a tax cut from Republicans? A national energy policy? Too hard. For a decade we sent our best minds not to make computer chips in Silicon Valley but to make poker chips on Wall Street, while telling ourselves we could have the American dream -- a home -- without saving and investing, for nothing down and nothing to pay for two years. Our leadership message to the world (except for our brave soldiers): "After you."

So much of today's debate between the two parties, notes David Rothkopf, a Carnegie Endowment visiting scholar, "is about assigning blame rather than assuming responsibility. It's a contest to see who can give away more at precisely the time they should be asking more of the American people."

Rothkopf and I agreed that we would get excited about U.S. politics when our national debate is between Democrats and Republicans who start by acknowledging that we can't cut deficits without both tax increases and spending cuts -- and then debate which ones and when -- who acknowledge that we can't compete unless we demand more of our students -- and then debate longer school days versus school years -- who acknowledge that bad parents who don't read to their kids and do indulge them with video games are as responsible for poor test scores as bad teachers -- and debate what to do about that.

Who will tell the people? China and India have been catching up to America not only via cheap labor and currencies. They are catching us because they now have free markets like we do, education like we do, access to capital and technology like we do, but, most importantly, values like our Greatest Generation had. That is, a willingness to postpone gratification, invest for the future, work harder than the next guy and hold their kids to the highest expectations.

In a flat world where everyone has access to everything, values matter more than ever. Right now the Hindus and Confucians have more Protestant ethics than we do, and as long as that is the case we'll be No. 11!

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