

Hello Everyone,

I don't know about you, but I'm getting tired of our political bickering. I'm equally annoyed by the demand that the President “fix” our economy and “create jobs.” We all got in the current economic fix together, and we'll only get out of it together.

While we continued on our merry way over the last few decades, enjoying what Robert Reich (too predictably liberal for me) calls the Great Prosperity, the world fundamentally changed, as Tom Friedman and others point out.

Our predicament is not the doing of President Obama or any of his predecessors. It is not largely a result of government policy or evil corporations let alone sub-prime mortgages. It is probably due to a highly complex combination of cultural, technological, geo-political and other factors too complex for anyone to disentangle.

The world's economy, and America's place in it, is what some call an “emergent system.” Emergence is a concept that has been considered for a very long time but is new to me. As one of my favorite sources, David Brooks, put it in his book, The Social Animal,

Through most of human history, people have tried to understand their world through deductive reasoning. That is to say, they have been inclined to take things apart to see how they work...The problem with this approach is that it has trouble explaining dynamic complexity, the essential feature of a human being, a culture, or a society. So, recently there has been a greater appreciation for the structure of emergent systems. Emergent systems exist when...the pieces of a system interact, and out of their interaction something entirely new emerges... [independent of] a central controller.

In his 2001 book, Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities and Software, Steven Johnson is one recent commentator on this topic. One of the examples of an emergent system that he explores is an ant colony, which is organized without a leader, unlike a beehive led by a queen. Other examples are poverty or, my favorite, the stock market. Dynamically complex without a central controller.

Probably for some of the reasons I mentioned above, the United States has over the past few decades become more deeply engaged in the global economic system at an ever-accelerating pace. It is an emergent system where there is no central controller. “Instead,” as Brooks puts it,

“once a pattern of interaction is established, it has a downward influence on the behavior of the components.” The U.S. is but one component of the global economy, albeit the largest one.

The idea that one person – even an exceptional one like Barack Obama – can exert control over the emergent system that is the U.S. economy, let alone the global economy, is foolhardy. The President could, however, help us to better understand how things have changed and what we collectively, as Americans, might do to respond to these changes over time.

The simple outlines of this might be: “We are part of a global economy now. There’s no going back. So, we have to become a stronger global economic competitor.”

In his State of the Union address last January, the President already gave us our call to action. We must “out-educate, out-innovate, and out-build” our competitors.

He could slightly amend his central campaign slogan for this larger purpose: “Yes, we Americans can.” This is a positive message which urges collective action.

All entities – be they countries, companies, universities, or sports teams – need worthy competitors (not enemies). Competition is a unifying force which makes them all better.

One useful perspective, among many, on how conditions have changed is offered in a paper given to me recently by a University of Chicago colleague which was published by the Woodrow Wilson Center at Princeton University. It argues that competing economically is the answer to these changed conditions. It is entitled “A National Strategic Narrative” – which will appeal to those clamoring for narrative. But, it is really a call for “A National Prosperity and Security Narrative.” It was written by Navy Capt. Wayne Porter and Marine Col. Mark Myklaby under the pseudonym “Mr. Y” in the manner of George Kennan’s highly influential piece on “containing” the Soviet Union, which he penned in 1947 under the pseudonym “X.”

In her preface to the paper, Anne-Marie Slaughter, writes: “In one sentence, the strategic narrative of the United States in the 21st century is that we want to become the strongest competitor and most influential player in a deeply inter-connected global system, which requires that we invest less in defense and more in sustainable prosperity and the tools of effective global engagement...The Y article...responds directly to five major transitions in the global system (emphasis added; see the Attachment for the full article):

- 1) From control in a closed system to credible influence in an open system.
- 2) From containment to sustainment.

- 3) From deterrence and defense to civilian engagement and competition.
- 4) From zero sum to positive sum global politics/economics.
- 5) From national security to national prosperity and security.

One last piece of advice for President Obama, if I may be so bold, is to learn to be repetitive, as boring as that can be. Drew Faust made this point in an interview in the business section of the *New York Times* in 2009, soon after ascending to the presidency of Harvard:

Q. Given your role, I imagine that people are not shy about giving you feedback about your leadership style.

A. One lesson I've learned has to do with communication. Someone would say, "Well, you've never talked about X," and I'd say, "I've talked about that here, there, here. I talk about that all the time." Then I realize that "all the time" isn't enough. You have to do "all the time," and more.

Q. Even though you feel as if you're repeating yourself over and over?

A. Yes, and that's another thing. As a scholar, you don't want to repeat yourself ever. You're supposed to say it once, publish it, and then it's published and you don't say it again. If someone comes and gives a scholarly paper about something they've already published, that's just terrible. As a university president, you have to say the same thing over and over and over. That's very important [emphasis added].

Good advice, Mr. President. "Yes, we Americans can." But, we must "out-educate, out-innovate, and out-build" our global competitors.

Please, as always, pass it on. And, remember that previous Obamagrams are stored on <http://sites.google.com/site/obamagramsbylewis>.

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