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How to Ruin American Enterprise

Fri Dec 13, 12:02 PM ET

By Benjamin J. Stein

We're well on our way to squelching what gives this country an edge. What would it take to kill innovation altogether?

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As a casual observer of what makes this country work and what stops it cold, I hereby offer a few suggestions on how we can ruin American competitiveness and innovation in the course of this century. I think the reader will agree with me that we are already far down the road on many of them:

1) Allow schools to fall into useless decay. Do not teach civics or history except to describe America as a hopelessly fascist, reactionary pit. Do not expect students to know the basics of mathematics, chemistry and physics. Working closely with the teachers' unions, make sure that you dumb down standards so that children who make the most minimal effort still get by with flying colors. Destroy the knowledge base on which all of mankind's scientific progress has been built by guaranteeing that such learning is confined to only a few, and spread ignorance and complacency among the many. Watch America lose its scientific and competitive edge to other nations that make a comprehensive knowledge base a rule of the society.

2) Encourage the making of laws and rules by trial lawyers and sympathetic judges, especially through class actions. Bypass the legislative mechanisms that involve elected representatives and a president. This will stop--or at least greatly slow down--innovation, as corporations and individuals hesitate to explore new ideas for fear of getting punished (or regulated to death) by litigation for any misstep, no matter how slight, in the creation of new products and services. Make sure that lawsuits against drugmakers are especially encouraged so that the

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companies are afraid to develop new lifesaving drugs, lest they be sued for sums that will bankrupt them. Make trial lawyers and judges, not scientists, responsible for the flow of new products and services.

3) Create a culture that blames the other guy for everything and discourages any form of individual self-restraint or self-control. Promote litigation to punish tobacco companies on the theory that they compel innocent people to smoke. Make it second nature for someone who is overweight to blame the restaurant that served him fries. Encourage a legal process that can kill a drug company for any mistakes in self-medication. Make it a general rule that anyone with more money than a plaintiff is responsible for anything harmful that a plaintiff does. Promulgate the pitiful joke that Americans are hereby exempt from any responsibility for their own actions--so long as there are deep pockets around to be rifled.

4) Sneer at hard work and thrift. Encourage the belief that all true wealth comes from skillful manipulation and cunning, or from sudden, brilliant and lucky strokes that leave the plodding, ordinary worker and saver in the dust. Make sure that society's idols are men and women who got rich from being sexy in public or through gambling or playing tricks, not from hard work or patience. Make the citizenry permanently envious and bewildered about where real success comes from.

5) Hold the managers of corporations to extremely lax standards of conduct and allow them to get off with a slap on the wrist when they betray the trust of shareholders. This will discourage thrift and investment and ensure that Americans will have far less capital to work with than other societies, while simultaneously developing that contempt for law and social standards that is the hallmark of failing nations. Hold the management of labor unions to no ethical standards.

6) While you're at it, discourage respect for law in every possible way. This will dissolve the glue that holds the nation together, and dissuade any long-term thinking. Societies in which the law can be clearly seen to apply to some and not to others are doomed to decay, in terms of innovation and everything else.

7) Encourage a mass culture that spits on intelligence and study and instead elevates drug use, coolness through sex and violence, and contempt for school. As children learn to be stupid instead of smart, the national intelligence base needed for innovation will simply vanish into MTV-land.

8) Mock and belittle the family. Provide financial incentives to people willing to live an isolated existence, vulnerable and frightened. This guarantees that men and women of sufficient character to bring about innovation will be psychologically stifled from an early age.

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9) Develop a suicidal immigration policy that keeps out educated, hardworking men and women from friendly nations and, instead, takes in vast numbers of angry, uneducated immigrants from nations that hate us. This, too, leads to the shrinking of our knowledge base and the eventual disappearance of social cohesion.

10) Enact a tax system that encourages class antagonism and punishes saving, while rewarding indebtedness, frivolity and consumption. Tax the fruits of labor many times:

First tax it as income. Then tax it as real or personal property. Then tax it as capital gains. Then tax it again, at a staggeringly high level, at death. This way, Americans are taught that only fools save, and that it is entirely proper for us to have the lowest savings rate in the developed world. This will deprive us of much-needed capital for new investment, for innovation and our own personal aspirations. It will compel us to ask foreigners for ever more capital and allow them to own more of America. It will also promote an attitude of carelessness about the future and, once again, encourage disrespect for law.

11) Have a socialized medical system that scrimps on badly needed drugs and procedures, resorts to only the cheapest practices and discourages drug companies from developing new drugs by not paying them enough to cover their costs of experimentation, trial and error.

12) Elevate mysticism, tribalism, shamanism and fundamentalism--and be sure to exclude educated, hardworking men and women--to an equal status with technology in the public mind. Make sure that, in order to pay proper (and politically correct) respect to all different ethnic groups in America, you act as if science were on an equal footing with voodoo and history with ethnic fable.

My list need not end here. But I stopped at a dozen because I realized that this is already, in large measure, the program of so many of our elected representatives. The debauchery of our tort system is already in place, and the rest of the agenda is under way.

Benjamin J. Stein is a lawyer, economist, writer and actor, and host of the game show Win Ben Stein's Money.

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