

A New Imperative, Innovation by Kathleen N. Kingscott

Developed nations take justifiable pride in their history of innovation: they have served as the world's biggest experiment in democratic capitalism, cultural cradles that have spawned inspiring architecture, the transistor, the ice cream cone and robotic rovers on Mars.

But innovation is more than a matter of creativity or inventiveness: it is the economic engine that experts say has generated the productivity responsible for half of GDP growth over the past half century.

If innovation-fueled productivity is the wellspring of the success story of the developed world, such a track record is no guarantee that these nations will be as innovative in this century as they were in the last. In fact, current trends suggest otherwise. For the first time ever, in 2003 the country that attracted the greatest foreign investment was not among the developed nations but was China.

The globalization of commerce, communication and knowledge has enabled many more countries to play the innovation game today. These hungry new players are modeling their plans on the successes and best practices of the developed world. In emerging markets, lower labor or manufacturing costs and aggressive investments in education have effectively changed the rules of that game.

Today, France and America must take a hard look at their options in this new, more challenging environment. They can do little, and blindly hope that the ingenuity and industriousness of business people, scientists and entrepreneurs will be enough to sustain their competitiveness.

Or they can rise to the occasion, increase their flexibility, point an army of bright minds at the problem, and go out and solve it. They have many strengths: open economies for trade and investment, stable governments, and potent technology bases. American culture appears more capable of taking risks, however.

In Washington, DC, the National Innovation Initiative (NII) delivered its report on this strategic subject on December 15th. The report did not create an instant solution to expanding America's innovation capacity. Rather, it developed a map toward that goal, the product of a year-long effort by more than 200 U.S. universities, corporations and thought leaders to identify broad societal and policy opportunities for America to discover and develop insights to drive growth and enhance human life.

The challenge it poses really comes down to a question of national priorities and political will which apply both in America and in France. Are these developed nations ready to accept that continuing economic leadership depends not on how well they've done in the past, but on how effectively a nation can organize itself and its institutions around breakthrough thinking and bold new ideas?

Inspiring policymakers, business leaders, scholars and scientists to work together on this tough challenge has the ironic twist that, like freedom, no one is opposed to it. But few leaders know how

to be real advocates for it. Both France and America must develop such leaders across all their sectors, industry, academia, labor and government.

Indeed, succeeding on this front will require not only a wide array of measures, but broad consensus and participation. We all need to look forward, not just to the next four years, but to the next four decades. We must decide how we invest in the talent and health of our nations, and in the infrastructures of data, energy, education, and research that will support human innovators.

Most important, which leaders will step forward to make innovating our nations an urgent, multifaceted program on par with other great missions like reaching the moon and decoding the human genome?

We need to find these leaders to join in this grandest of challenges: to make our nations new kinds of engines for innovation, growth and global prosperity, at home and abroad.