Thriving on Common Ground

A MAJOR U.S. ELECTION IS IMMINENT, WITH VOTING ON 6 NOVEMBER (SEE THE SPECIAL NEWS
section on p. 456). A central issue dividing the two major political parties is how best to allo-
cate scarce resources, as the country attempts to reduce its budget deficit without jeopardiz-
ing national prosperity. In last week’s Editorial, John Hamre, a former U.S. Deputy Secretary
of Defense, described how this challenge, coupled with the polarization of U.S. politics and
a dogmatic refusal to compromise, has created “one of the most perilous conditions that I
can remember in my professional life.”* To move forward, it is important to identify general
principles for a successful future on which essentially all Americans can agree—principles
that are also relevant for other nations.

Why are some nations much more successful than others? In my second year in college, I
had a “eureka” moment when, struggling to come to grips with the forces that shape human
societies, I suddenly became aware of the vital role of “institutions”: organizations such as universities, corporations, or governments,
in which people cooperate to produce results that individuals could
never accomplish alone. Although I had previously interacted with
many such organizations, until that moment I had totally ignored
their fundamental importance to society.

I have since learned that it is primarily through their roles in insti-
tutions that talented and well-motivated individuals can make enor-
mous contributions to a nation. And it is the sum of many thousands
of institutions, and millions of such people, that makes a nation thrive.
Any successful nation must therefore support a system of education
and training that casts a very wide net for talent, thereby enabling
as many of its people as possible to acquire the abilities, moti-
vation, and skills essential for maintaining and continually
improving its important institutions. The United States is
fortunate to have a strong and respected higher education system, with major public
universities as well as over 1000 local community colleges that provide low-cost,
multiple entry points to a higher education. But these critical institutions have been
suffering from decades of decreasing resources, and they urgently need more support.

Can Americans agree that our political leaders should pay much more attention to improv-
ing and nurturing the public education system at all levels?

Developing talent is fundamental, but it is not enough. Each nation must also support a legal
system that forces its institutions to behave in appropriate ways, as well as systems of ethical
standards that promote prosocial behavior.† Less obvious is the need for merit-based systems
that allow only the most capable people to advance to the many positions of responsibility and
authority in a nation’s institutions. Rules that support automatic tenure and promotion, so as
to “protect individual rights,” may seem well-meaning, but such rules have calamitous results.
Each nation will thrive only to the extent that its institutions promote and maintain individuals
in positions of responsibility based on their demonstrated performance, irrespective of senior-
ity, family connections, or national origins. Can Americans agree that it is crucial to constantly
enhance policies that build and encourage such a merit-based society?

Finally, institutions thrive when they are rooted in scientific principles—in rational thought,
scientific knowledge, and the innovations derived from scientific understanding to benefit
humanity. No matter how contentious the topic, whether climate change, the immunization
of children, or the benefits of genetically modified crops, scientists and politicians must work
together much more effectively to ensure that the scientific research needed for wise decision-
making by vital institutions is both supported and never ignored. I am certain that millions of
U.S. scientists are ready to contribute. Can all Americans agree?

— Bruce Alberts

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†D. Acemoglu, J. Robinson, Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity,
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