

Pittsburgh myth, Paris reality

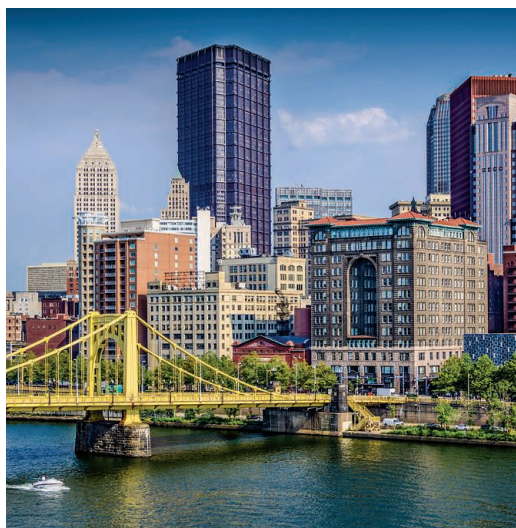
When announcing his decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Agreement, President Trump reminded the world that, “I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris.” In doing so, he repeated a tired trope: that Pittsburgh is a rusty urban relic—a manufacturing city of steel that has fallen on hard times, held back by unfair global competition and onerous environmental regulation. But such a nostalgic version of Pittsburgh, and of many other communities across the country, is a myth. If the president truly wants to represent the interests of Americans, he would learn from the real histories of these regions and promote economic and environmental progress through research, education, and innovation.

Biographer James Parton, visiting Pittsburgh in its manufacturing heyday, described the smoky, sooty landscape as “hell with the lid taken off.” By the early 1940s, after decades of leading the nation in steel production, the city was paying a heavy price for its economic success. Industry leaders, realizing that environmental catastrophe would be bad for business, partnered with local government in one of the country’s first clean air initiatives.

Environmental regulations did not drive the region’s coal industry—long the engine of manufacturing—to collapse. That industry’s fate is more intricately tied to the availability of low-cost natural gas, whose rise—including the shale gas boom—was buoyed by U.S. research efforts during the oil embargo of the 1970s. A lack of innovation and investment were the true linchpins of Pittsburgh’s economic distress. Its aging and inefficient factories were unable to compete with foreign firms. The city lost nearly half of its population, unemployment peaked at 17% in 1983, and Pittsburgh became an economic shadow of its former self.

The region clawed back from its economic break-

down by refocusing on technology innovation fueled by federally funded research at its major universities, especially Carnegie Mellon University and the University of Pittsburgh. Today, Pittsburgh is home to one of the most vibrant technology and health care markets in the country. It is teeming with startup companies and is an internationally recognized research leader in medicine, robotics, advanced manufacturing, big data, and autonomous systems. It is no accident that the top of the city’s tallest building now advertises the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center—not U.S. Steel.



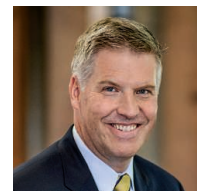
“Such history...reminds us that economic and environmental narratives are intertwined.”

Such history, seen in Pittsburgh and elsewhere across the country, reminds us that economic and environmental narratives are intertwined. Climate change creates economic costs, a simple reality of doing business on a finite planet. There can be costs associated with countries working together to slow and adapt to global warming, or costs can result from natural disasters and climate-caused disruption. The economic upside, under these circumstances, is to be the first to develop and market innovative solutions to global climate change and its effects.

Instead of shielding domestic businesses from this opportunity, the United States should be increasing its investments in climate- and energy-related research and supporting the most innovative companies. Training and education should be bolstered so that all Americans can thrive in this rapidly changing economy. The draconian cuts proposed in these areas by the Trump administration augur a less-competitive economic future—even if environmental restrictions are lifted.

The real story of Pittsburgh, and the real story of the United States, points to an economic approach to the challenge of climate change that is drastically different from that voiced by the president. It’s a story that says, from a place of hard-earned experience: Be the innovation leader.

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