

The Wrong Place for Innovation

President Obama should have convened his wunderkind assembly in Chicago.

Last week, I read that the President was assembling the biggest names in Silicon Valley to confer on jobs, education, and innovation. The notion that the good folks in Silicon Valley know anything about U.S. manufacturing jobs and education seems a trifle foolish. As I said last month, I think Silicon Valley is the drain through which our hard earned money flows as we become more enchanted with IT gadgets.

While I do admire the innovative spirit that seems to flourish in that area, I am not sure that it's the best place to ask for insights regarding how to enhance jobs or education. Steve Jobs certainly knows innovation, but what does he, Mark Zuckerberg, or any of them know about creating real manufacturing jobs?

President Obama should have convened his wunderkind assembly in Chicago. He should have asked the heads of Caterpillar, Baldor, Emerson, Kohler, and a dozen other Midwest heavy iron companies for advice, since many of their products seem to still be made by American workers and designed by American engineers. Without companies like these, we lose our strategic ability to create the jobs that provide our middle with a decent living. In this downward spiral, we also lose the engineers and scientists of the future, those who will be required to keep this country on the leading edge of innovation through the commercial products we produce and the preparedness of our military.

We are the strongest nation, militarily and economically, the world has ever seen. We export not only goods, but good. We believe in human rights, democracy, and the amazing idea that it is one's efforts and hard work that earns a place at the table of freedom. Without our military — a military that technologically dominates friend and foe alike — we will become a third rate power and will inevitably be forced to succumb to some future dictators. With that fate, the good that we export will be lost.

On a more positive note, I just might

amaze you this month with a bit of out-of-character optimism. While I clearly do not hold out much hope from the assemblage of IT moguls in Silicon Valley, I do take sustenance from the efforts of our food equipment manufacturing industry.

I weigh in at about 250 pounds, so no one need remind me how important food is in this world. Besides energy and healthcare, what else consumes our dollars and effort more than food? I recently returned from the bi-annual National Association of Food Equipment Manufacturers' convention in Orlando, FL. I must say that this show made most of the other conventions I have attended look like a weekend flea market. Maybe the Consumer Electronics Show is bigger, but that one is in Las Vegas and I am pretty sure most of the attendees simply have an insane desire to throw money away on the slots.

Two pieces of good news from the food convention: the industry has an enormous amount of great engineering, and most of the manufacturing seems to be taking place right here in the United States.

As I wandered booth to booth, I began to realize that when it comes to grills, freezers, holding pens, and the gear that cooks, prepares, and preserves your food in restaurants all over the country, it is being made right here in the U.S. by folks like Taylor, Duke, Prince Castle, or Alto-Shaam. Some of these companies do have offshore plants, but they seem to be using them for the Far East markets, and not for import back to the U.S.

On the downside, I did not find much innovation push on the products displayed at the conference. Even the innovation area was a bit lame. A portable hot/cold case with solar cells to generate power for the sensors just didn't cut it for me, but when I looked for green technology, I was shocked by what I found.


A cold case for bottled drink products may not sound like a big deal. It's a refrigerator for soda, so what? On the other hand, a more energy efficient cold case for the thousands of

small mom and pop stores throughout Central and South America and the rest of the developing world? Now that's a big deal.

Imbera North America, a company based in Mexico and owned by the second largest Coca-Cola bottler in the world, has designed and is manufacturing a cold case that uses LED lighting, propane as a refrigerant, variable speed fans coupled to a variable speed compressor, super efficient insulation foamed with a non-CFC (Chlorofluorocarbon) foaming agent, super insulated glass doors, and recycled steel. I am not sure one can get more green, efficient, and innovative.

While Mexico is not the U.S. and the engineers are from Monterrey (not California), I will engage in a bit of Northern Hemispheric jingoism and proclaim pride in their innovative work. I am just delighted that someone on the North American continent is innovating.

Perhaps our President is looking in the wrong place for innovation and guidance on education. When a country as poor as Mexico can turn out terrific, in-your-face innovation manufactured by workers who are still striving for their version of a middle class life and designed by engineers who didn't have the privilege of an MIT degree, maybe he should be asking us all why we have been granted so much, yet are increasingly occupied with so little.

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By Mike Rainone



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