

The Real Cost Of This Recession

More people are enamored with the idea of instant celebrity than with hard work, determination and higher education

It's finally gotten to me. I have given up on innovation, invention, small business, hard work and sacrifice as a means of rescue. I don't mean rescue from our current economic tribulation; I mean rescue from economic and social misery.

From the current tenor of discourse in this society, it has become obvious that it is only the shrillness of the shout, or the image on the Facebook page that carries the day. It is neither the facts nor the truth, but only how virulent the outrage that one side can manufacture importance. I used to believe we could be a society of innovators, of entrepreneurs, of small business folk all working together to better our lives and the lives of others.

I am astounded at my own delusions. It seems we have become a society of carpers, petty grabbers after limited resources and companies and groups who live a zero-sum game.

Think about the conditions that drive us toward innovation. It's hard to be innovative when the spirit is not right, when one seeks a life too easy or when one's drive or imagination is focused on becoming famous by doing something stupid on reality television or YouTube. We have a populace more interested in image than substance. More people are enamored with the idea of instant celebrity than with hard work, determination and higher education.

When pundits, along with the paid tools of lobbyists, are able to convince an increasingly gullible public that healthcare reform is going to pull the plug on grandma's respirator, you know that there is not an ounce of critical thinking going on.

This bitter hostility has brought us full circle. When we started declaring war on America with the Contract "on" America, we were taught to hate our government. Our government is a reflection of us as a people, it has good actors and bad, efficient, hard working, smart folks and clunks — just like society.

Forty years ago, people were willing to negotiate and understand that government had a part to play in our lives. That thought process helped lead us out of the Great Depression and triumph in World War II. It organized the great thrust into world dominance through the Marshall Plan, revitalized technical education after Sputnik scared us and led us to the moon. We did that, we the people — through the government.

We accepted that we are a social democracy, that's why we can go out and get an SBIR or STTR or NIH or NASA or DARPA or DOE or EPA or whatever grant to fund our innovation. That's why we have a monetary system, a judicial system that upholds our laws of commerce, a system of roads that transports our goods, an educational system that educates (albeit poorly these days) our workforce, and a wonderful military, with all four of my sons, to protect our collective butts. These things we have because we are a social democracy, not a socialistic planned economy; and nothing any nutcase could ever say will convince me that this or any other administration wants to

make us a planned, socialist economy. Even national healthcare does not bring us to socialism; it simply extends our social democracy, and possibly lowers my burden as a small business owner.

The great dilemma is that we are now suspicious of anything the government does.

There is talk about cutting NASA's Constellation moon program, because it's too expensive and perhaps untenable, but for every dollar NASA spends we get multiples back in technological benefits. Killing space exploration or even putting it in the hands of the for profit crowd just puts another nail in the coffin of our imagination.

When we begin to think that the recession is over and start to clamor that we're spending too much, we are cutting our own collective throat. We're going to kill innovation, because in a recession innovation is hurt first and foremost.

Instead of gutting the stimulus package, we need to be putting more money into innovation. We need more money in the SBA, more in SBIRs, more in the NIH, NSF, DARPA. We need more money set aside for small businesses innovators. We need another great thrust of money and effort into education, especially in science and math. Most of all, we need to stop deluding ourselves.

Repeat this over and over again until you really get it: There is no such thing as a free lunch. If we want good education, we have to pay for it. If we want to maintain a technological lead, we have to invest in it. If we want to have a stable society, we all have to share in the burdens and the wealth. If we want a decent lifestyle, we have to work for it, not wish for it. If we want a decent planet to live on, we have to preserve it. If we want good government we have to listen to each other, bargain in good faith and make sure we all get something, even if it means giving something up. If we want that bright future, we have to invent it.

The reality is that your innovation is not going to be funded by the free market system. That system is stifling, risk averse, and only willing to invest in sure things — it wants easy money.

We are left with our friends, our families, our countrymen and, dare I say, our government — all of whom gain by our success. This is what our social democracy does best — it funds the risky innovation, takes chances for the benefit of all. It goes where no free market is willing to go.

Mike Rainone is the co-founder of PCDwords, a technology development firm specializing in breakthrough product innovation. You can contact him at mrain1@pcdworks.com or by visiting www.pcdworks.com. **PDD**

By Mike Rainone



Repeat this over and over again: There is no such thing as a free lunch.