

# If Arizona is Wrong on Immigration, then what?

WASHINGTON – The always relevant The New York Times dedicated an Editorial, “*Showdown in Arizona*”, July 28, 2010, to the Federal Court injunction that essentially blocks the “anti-immigrant” Arizona law just about when it was due to take effect. The paper clearly agrees with the Obama administration that challenged the legality/constitutionality of the Arizona state law dealing with a matter, immigration, traditionally reserved to federal authorities. The paper says that it is good to block states’ unwarranted activism, especially when the statutes they pass invite discrimination, racial profiling and other bad stuff. The piece’s conclusion, however, is baffling.

***“Judge Bolton’s ruling reminded us all of the unacceptable price of the Arizona way: an incoherent immigration system, squandered law enforcement resources, diminished public safety, the awful sight of a nation of immigrants turning on itself. Mr. Obama took a big risk when he filed suit against the Arizona law, and deserves credit for that. We hope he goes on to make clear to all the states that the Arizona way is not the American way”.***

Not the American way.....

Fine. So, it is stipulated that “the Arizona way is not the American way”. State activism in a matter –immigration– that should be ruled and administered (wisely?) by Washington is not permissible. This is not the American way. And, instead, the American way is...? Well, this we are not told. Quite baffling. We are not told what that is.

Lacking other indications, then, are we to conclude that “the

American way" is the continuation of this mess of *de facto* lawlessness within which millions of illegal immigrants every day take a chance, hoping that nothing will happen? Is the American way Federal immigration laws on the books but not seriously enforced, except here and there, almost whimsically, deporting some illegals every now and then? Is the American way the open tolerance of illegals, without taking serious steps to offer them a reasonable path to legalize their status, because such a step would be politically unpalatable? Is it the American way a porous national border that cannot be properly policed?

Let's hope not. America is a country ruled by laws. In this area we have a mess, almost anarchy. We should fix it. If, indeed, the Arizona way is wrong, well, then let's do it the right way. Leaving things as they are now, whatever The New York Times may think, is not smart, is not right and is not the American way, whereby important processes, such as immigration, should take place within clear and enforceable laws.

### **What should be done? Extreme positions will not do**

So, what should be done about immigration? Let's be clear, the hard line, conservative approach, articulated mostly by Republican members of the House of Representatives, whereby we strictly follow current law and start deporting all the illegals down to the last one is pure demagogic lunacy. It is unworkable, not to mention unjust. The notion that full enforcement of current immigration statutes is an absolute law and order imperative to protect America from all the criminals and potentially the terrorists who come as illegals is also silly. Sure enough there are criminals among the illegals. But are we saying that all or most of the estimated 12 million or more here illegally are criminals who represent a threat to society or national security? This is preposterous and everybody knows it.

## **Being here does not constitute a right**

By the same token, the attitude of the Latino community, whereby everybody who is here, by virtue of this fact has an absolute, sacrosanct, implicit right to everything, (residency, citizenship, social services), is also preposterous. America is a country, not a charity or a hostel with an "All Welcome, No Questions Asked" sign at the door.

And let's not confuse the acceptance of persecuted political refugees with an unregulated, open regime for all economic immigrants. Yes, America is a country of immigrants; and this is its strength. But immigration should take place within certain procedures. The notion that getting in, no matter how, creates a *de facto* entitlement to stay is not a good way to administer anything. All reasonable people should acknowledge this. All Latino legal residents who clamor for total acceptance of anybody, no matter what should recognize this.

## **Right now: deal with the emergency**

Of course, right now we have a two pronged issue. We have to fix this mess, while we think about an appropriate immigration regime for the future. However, right now, today, we must resolve this huge anomaly that was allowed to fester until it became a national crisis involving millions of people. While we do not want to continue on a path that encourages illegal immigration going forward, for now, we have to resolve the problem we have. We can blame whoever we want for this.

It is clear that a relaxed attitude towards illegal immigrants compounded over many years created this problem. This anomaly needs to be corrected and soon; so that America can reclaim the right to be a country of laws and not a relaxed, informal arrangement stretched here or there by people who get here, reach critical numerical mass overtime, and then, by sheer force of numbers, manage to impose solutions

## **We have to offer a workable path to legalization**

So, in order to deal with this situation, an equitable solution must be found, somehow. And realistically a solution will not be in finding a middle point, splitting the difference between those who want total legalization and those who want to deport all the illegals. Any realistic solution has to be biased in favor of the millions of people who are here and who have been here for many years. Most of them are law abiding. Many have children who were born here. The idea that we need to deport illegal aliens because most of them are wanted criminals is just laughable, not to mention untrue. Sure enough there are criminals among them, and they should be dealt with. But individually, one by one, each case examined on its merit, and not as part of criminalized ethnic groups.

### **Yes, it is “amnesty”**

And yes, let's be candid: any process aimed at allowing people to legalize their status will be, in practice, if not in name, an *“amnesty”*. *The idea that any legalization process has to be punitive, (with fines and other penalties attached), in as much as these people are law breakers to begin with may be right in the abstract, but unworkable and unjust in practice.*

Some have argued that by allowing a simple path to legalization, we would reward law breakers. Well, yes and no. While it would be nice to differentiate among various categories, can we call someone who came here 20 years ago and who since then found a job, paid taxes and so on, a “law breaker” who needs to be punished? That is a stretch.

### **A punitive approach will not do**

But the purists think otherwise. Some in the past had introduced a legalization scenario whereby all the illegals will go back to their country of origin, apply at a US Consulate, take a number, wait at the end of the immigration line, pay a hefty fine and then patiently wait for their turn to be called in. This may look right in principle; but it is

totally unworkable. If these were just a few hundred people, it might be done. But for more than 10-12 million people? Imagine administering all this. And imagine the incredible and completely unnecessary disruption for all those families. If someone is working, and most of them are, how will they deal with that? Just take a few months, or may be a few years leave and relocate elsewhere, where they have not lived for years or even decades?

***So, legalization will have to be an amnesty, in fact, if not in name. And we need to do this, and do it fast, because it is intolerable in a modern society to have millions of people forced to live in the shadow, because of their status. Sure, make people pay a processing fee, whatever, as long as it is realistic, based on their ability to pay. But that will be that.***

And, going forward....?

Of course, assuming success of this massive legalization process, going forward we have to create truly secure borders. Many assert that unless we militarize our borders, the draw of jobs from rich America will continue to be irresistible and soon enough we shall be faced with another wave of illegals. Besides, as we go ahead with an amnesty, other would-be illegals will take comfort on the historic rule whereby, once their numbers grow and this becomes once more a political issue, then Washington will cave in once more and will legalize everybody.

### **Guest workers programs**

To some extent, this danger is real, and thus we have to improve border security. But I assume that it will be a lot easier to have secure borders once we have put in place a guest workers program, (more on this below), tailored for seasonal workers and those who come only for work; not because

they would like to relocate. Right now, many of these people seeking only economic opportunity are forced to be illegal immigrants because they cannot move back and forth in the light of day. If we legalize and properly manage this seasonal workers flow, this would put a stop to their need to try and cross the border illegally.

### **Some basic stipulations: loyalty to America and learn English**

If we managed to do all this, (let me dream we can), on a couple of absolutely essential issues, though, we have a right to be strict. To all who want to be legalized:

1) *"If you want to be part of America, you have to know and show respect for America's rules. You have to understand and sincerely embrace what this society is about, its core values, how it works. This is not too much to ask. Yes, people should have a minimum of proficiency in American history and civics".*

2) "And you should speak English. Yes; **"English"**. By default, or by whatever, the English language is the historically dominant language of the US and it is the common language that unites this country. All of those who want to make America their home should have a modicum of proficiency in English, so that they can communicate without any problem with everybody else".

### **Speaking English and maintaining cultural identity are not contradictory goals**

Let me be clear. All people are and should be free to keep, teach and cultivate their native languages and use them as much as they want. If they and their kids are bilingual or trilingual, it is great. But one of the languages they speak, read and write reasonably fluently should be English. This is our American national language. It is indispensable to have it and maintain it as a vehicle for all communications and transactions, so that we have a communication medium shared by all.

The idea that millions of people can live here but only within the confines of linguistic and ethnic enclaves, because lack of English prevents them from interacting with the wider society, is really bad. It is bad for them, as it restricts opportunity, and it is bad for America because of the obvious risk of becoming a fragmented society. The strength of America is and should be that new comers can retain their linguistic, religious and cultural identity, while they fully embrace the values and language of the United States. America is a country; not just a place to stay.

### **More on guest workers**

Alright. This should deal with all of those who want a path to citizenship. But, as mentioned above, there are many here who do not seek citizenship, but only economic opportunity. Well, all those who belong to this category should be eligible to receive perfectly legal, easy to obtain and renew guest worker visas. The only criteria for eligibility should be a match between the work they want to perform and the demand for such jobs in America. People enrolled in a future guest workers program should be free to come and go legally.

### **Find the courage to get this done**

Tall order, right? Yes, it is. But we have to find the courage to get this done. This courageous and humane action would reestablish America's credentials as a country that treats people fairly and that welcomes immigrants, provided they follow laws that should be easy to understand.

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# America: Open Doors to Foreign Innovators

WASHINGTON – There are two issues confronting America's economic vitality. One is the disturbingly weak short term economic picture and how to improve it. The other –and indeed far bigger one– is doubts about US long term competitiveness.

## Short term

The short term economic problem unfortunately gets to be intertwined, with the political need to force visible results in terms of new employment now, before the November mid-term congressional elections. So, the sluggish economy is both an economic and a political problem for the Obama administration and for the Democrats standing for re-election who have to support it.

The president's party, no matter who is in power, usually loses seats in Congress after the mid-term elections. And the dominant issue causing voters to switch sides is usually the economy not doing as well as hoped/promised/expected. Voting against the president's party two years after voting him into office is a way for the electorate to show buyer's remorse. Of course, much of this happens because voters exaggerate the president's ability to influence economic outcomes via public policy; and because those who get elected, and this includes Barack Obama, usually over promised and thus, two years later, are short on results.

## Politics and economics blended

And this November, after two extremely difficult years managing the Big Crisis, while trying to build foundations for new prosperity, the economy, while somewhat improved, looks a lot worse than what people expected and worse than what the administration promised. So, the only



question is: how big a loss is it going to be for the Democrats? Will they lose the House? (Possibly). Or may be even the Senate? (Highly unlikely). Fearing the worst, the Democrats will calibrate their actions between now and November for immediate political effect, rather than long term economic soundness. And this usually means a lot of populism and not much substance.

### **Spin and counter spin**

More broadly, the dictates of the political calendar and the unfolding electoral fight tend to pollute the debate and impede an intelligent conversation about what is really going on. The administration wants you, the voter, to believe that the glass is half full and getting fuller as we speak. The Republicans want you to believe the opposite. But, in this exercise in spin and counter spin, we miss a dispassionate evaluation of the patient.

### **We shall recover from the Big Crisis, but slowly**

What is ailing America short term and long term? As for the short term, we could go on reciting once more the now canonic litany of what happened "to housing, sub prime mortgages, overleveraging by consumers, the banks", and so on. But all this has already been beaten to a pulp and so let's dispense with it. At some point, (although probably not soon enough to benefit the Democrats this November), we shall get out of the gigantic mess that unfolded in 2008-2009. Unemployment will go down some and the housing market will stabilize a bit. Nothing great, I am afraid, but better.

### **Long term issues: loss of competitiveness**

Regarding the long term, however, the prognosis is bad, as there is no indication whatsoever that there will be a truly dramatic take-off. The truly worrisome fact is that, because of other systemic problems, whose onset precedes the Big Crisis, we shall not spring back from the Big Crisis, eager

and fighting. We shall come back, somehow; but fatigued and wary. And why so? Let me give a short answer that may not embrace the full gamut of relevant factors; but that is nonetheless central.

In simple words: it seems that we have lost our magic touch with rapid fire innovation and our legendary ability to bring it to market, thus constantly re-generating the economy. We are still innovation players, but we are no longer the only or at least biggest game in town. While it is true that, as part of a long term growth strategy, we have to fix our fiscal picture through a serious reform of an entitlement system that, if unchecked, will lead to ruin, this would take care of the *public spending* side. But what about the *wealth generation* side? How can we generate many new viable enterprises, innovation and new value?

### **Andy Grove's alarm: we can no longer "scale up"**

Legendary Intel corporation leader Andy Grove lamented in a recent essay in Bloomberg BusinessWeek that US high tech enterprises will lose whatever edge they still retain, as they are no longer capable of "making" here what they invent. Grove maintains that the ability to control the "scaling up" of production, after having proven the viability of a new product, is itself a critical part of the innovation continuum. ***Today, critical innovation may still take place in the US, says Grove; however, not just some but all of the "scaling up" now is done in China. And this is not just because of the basic economic advantages (cheap labor) that China has; but by default, as we have lost the industrial infrastructure that would give us the domestic scaling up option if we wanted to exercise it.***

Grove believes that this is now irreversible and that this inability to make anything in high tech is a huge strategic disadvantage for America. The industries that do the scaling, he contends, gain "know how" and new skills in the process. In

time, mastery of the scaling process will give them the increased knowledge and the tools to become the future innovators. Innovation –he concludes– will shift to the localities where the scaling up is already taking place. This will be the new innovation ecosystem –and it will not be in the USA.

### **Vivek Wadhwa: the real issue is nurturing small enterprises**

Others disagree, maintaining that the real strategic asset of the US economy is still the army of small entrepreneurs who create the real, new jobs, thus constantly reviving, growing and positively transforming the economic landscape. If we want new growth and net job creation, maintains Vivek Wadhwa in an essay in response to Grove, also featured in Bloomberg Businessweek, then we should enable the many would-be entrepreneurs who are all too often blocked by lack of access to capital or their lack of practical understanding of how to properly start a business.

### **Make full use of university based research**

He also argues that the supposedly state of the art pipeline between academic research and the market place is clogged and not as good as it could be. As a result, the vaunted American genius to rapidly bring innovation to market is far less significant than legend would make us believe. Much valuable research is lost. Good ideas hatched in the lab never get to see the light of day. But if we remove these blockages, says Wadhwa, if we create a workable pathway, then we shall see a renaissance of enterprise, along with job creation, pushed forward by the many who have the genius and the will to make new things happen.

### **Chris Farrell: get more foreigners here**

Others like Chris Farrell, himself a Bloomberg Businessweek writer, look at the innovation picture from a different perspective: the unequalled American ability to draw into

America talent from abroad. He notes that America is still an incredibly powerful magnet capable of attracting scientist and entrepreneurs from other countries. The data is indeed staggering. Consider this: half of the new Silicon Valley start ups are created by foreign born entrepreneurs, mostly Indian and Chinese. One quarter of all new US patents have gone to foreign born innovators. A huge chunk of the higher degrees in science and technology awarded by the most prestigious universities go to foreigners. And many of them end up staying in the US.

### **Impressive contribution to America coming from foreign innovators**

And why so? Because, current shortness of breath notwithstanding, America still has an incredibly “enterprise friendly” ecosystem: a unique combination of Super Universities, National Laboratories, Venture Capital, depth and liquidity of broader capital markets, and a huge domestic market that is still the envy of the world. And this is why bright people come here. Farrell’s policy recommendation is very simple. Welcome all of them. Make it easier, for all who have the desire, to come and study here. After they complete their academic work, make it easy for them to stay here legally and set up shop.

In a word: let us use the built in advantage that we have got –an environment still quite favorable for innovators– and let’s make the most of it. We have spent decades to create MIT and Caltech and so on. Let’s make them the beacon, let’s use this native advantage in the same way as the Chinese use cheap labor and tax breaks to lure capital and to attract new business to their manufacturing facilities. The proven record is that foreign born innovators help America maintain its technological edge. They create businesses and employment. If so, the more, the merrier.

**Why America can no longer produce its own native talent?**

Farrell makes an excellent point. But his pragmatic recommendation implicitly accepts as a given the systemic failure of the US education system and American society in general to produce a sufficient number of native scientists and entrepreneurs. By recommending that we should get as many foreigners as we can get, so that they will feed the innovation and business creation pipeline, he sidesteps the painful question as to why Americans are now in many instances minorities within the student bodies of the premier US research universities.

Of course, the fact that we can attract foreign talent is a fantastic advantage that should be used for all it is worth. But we cannot ignore the baffling shortcoming of a US society and education system incapable of nurturing a new generation of talented researchers and innovators.

### **Do we need American born innovators?**

Oddly enough, the need to favor American native talent in science was pointed out long ago by Hungarian born physicist Edward Teller who came to the US as an immigrant and later on became the father of the H Bomb:

***“If we’re not going to make a determined effort for more education in hard science and engineering, then we better stop thinking of the United States as a leading nation in the world.”***

Historically America blended well native and new comers talent

So, while an immensely talented and extremely valuable immigrant himself, Teller believed that America needed to breed its own. Was he right? To a large degree, yes. The magic of America is or at least has been in the ability to blend native talent and expertise with an almost constant stream of new intellectual ingredients brought in by various waves of

new comers who came to America because of its openness and because of the real opportunity that it offered to foreigners. Edward Teller was one of them. And he was not the only one.

### **A long list of illustrious foreigners**

The list is long; and here are only a few examples. Scotland born Andrew Carnegie, steel industry leader and later on creator of one of the most remarkable philanthropies in US history. Nikola Tesla, innovator in electrical power, coming from Serbia. And of course physicist Albert Einstein. And then Hans Bethe, Felix Bloch, Enrico Fermi and Emil Konopinski, himself US born; but son of Polish immigrants. Hard to think of the "Manhattan Project" that brought about the A bomb and the end of the war with Japan without them. And impossible to think of the US space program without German born Wernher von Braun brought to the US after WWII and described by some as "the greatest rocket scientist in history".

And, if we get closer to our times, former Intel CEO Andy Grove, referred to above, an immigrant from Hungary. And what about the top leadership of Pepsico? CEO Indra Nooyi, born in India, Massimo d'Amore, CEO of Pepsico Americas, born in Italy. And then we have IT and then energy venture capitalist Vinod Khosla, from India. And this is just a tiny bit of what would be an incredibly long list of illustrious and not so illustrious names; (this second list would include the Indians running hundreds of motels, the Koreans operating so many tidy, immaculate grocery shops, and so on. These people did not go to MIT. But they were attracted by the possibility of "making it" in America, through hard work and personal drive. They enrich America; and they should be welcome, just as we welcome IT scientists).

### **Shall we rely on foreigners alone?**

Sure enough, the very talented foreign scientists and innovators came to America, as opposed to Romania, because

here in America there was a truly unique breeding ground, open to scientific innovation and its commercial applications. And yet, if we admit that America has lost (for good?) its internal regenerative ability, then future success in innovation is entirely in the hands of willing foreigners that will come here and provide the brains and the managerial talent that native born Americans can no longer supply. If this is so, then we are saying that the special "US blend" has to be, not just periodically reinvigorated, but actually created and nurtured primarily by foreign talent. This would be new. Will it work this way? We do not know. But you can bet that America would a lot different.

**In the meantime, let's make it easy for those who wish to come**

Be that as it may, just like Chris Farrell in his piece, I am for open borders and support for the foreign scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs who still believe that there are unique opportunities for people like them to set up shop in America.

I would like to believe that their interest in coming here and doing things here encompasses more than the dream of big bucks. In America, unhindered creativity is possible because there is Freedom. While the connection between the two may have become somewhat dim for the US native population, many who come from countries in which free inquiry (not just in science) is either thwarted or made complicated by lack of vision or capital should appreciate the real value of what they can find here.

**"Land of Enterprise"**

As Edward Teller said long ago, we have to nourish our own. And this may be possible if the right education and economic policies are designed and implemented. And we should vigorously work on them.

But, in the meantime, by all means let's use the appeal that

America still has, as *“The Country”* that holds research and enterprise in high esteem. Let’s make this our brand: *“America, The Land of Enterprise”*. Let everybody know about this. And let everybody who aspires to new discoveries and new businesses come here and feel welcome.

### **Innovators are welcome**

Long term, getting here the tens of thousands who at the moment may be contemplating this step of “Coming to America”, as the song says, may do more good to stimulate the regeneration of America’s fiber than pumping more tax payers dollars into this or that subsidized sector. If we need to make it a lot easier for those would-be entrepreneurs who wish to come but still hesitate, as they think about the complexities of getting to the US and then the challenge of navigating the still forbidding immigration processes, by all means let’s do so.

Ultimately, high quality human capital is the most fundamental strategic asset. Our ability to attract it here is our strength. And so let’s use this strength!

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## **Counterinsurgency against a political clock**

**WASHINGTON** – How are we doing in Afghanistan, now that General David Petraeus has taken over? Well, it depends on who is answering the question. The administration, of course, would



like to present a bright picture, as evidence that its policies are working. However, a few days ago, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, seemed to be in great difficulty explaining to skeptical senators, including many Democrats, what progress is being made in Afghanistan several months into the new policies that followed the major strategic readjustment ordered by president Barack Obama late last year.

### **US goals in Afghanistan**

As we know, the new strategy called for a significant increase of US forces, (about 30,000 additional troops), along with additions coming from NATO allies, (this is ostensibly a NATO operation), and others. There would also be a redoubled, (“new and improved”?), comprehensive effort to bring about economic development, through more and (this time around) better aid programs. The idea was that a new two pronged (military and economic) vigorous counter insurgency effort would weaken the Taliban, strengthen the shaky Kabul government led by President Hamid Karzai, while winning over many Afghans still uncertain as to who would win the war and thus who they should support. The new strategy was accompanied by great confidence in eventual success. Indeed, it was indicated at the time that by July 2011 there would be a beginning of US withdrawal. In brief, this was the political message to a suspicious US public: “quickly in”; “victory”; and then quickly out”.

### **Support for the US?...**

Anyway, one of the seemingly positive things that Holbrooke stated during his recent testimony is that several opinion polls, such as they are in the context of a primitive country, indicate that at most only 10 per cent of the Afghan population supports the Taliban. His implicit point is that the other 90 per cent are on our side; and this would be good news, showing that the balance has shifted in our favor. Well,

not quite so, it seems.

**...Not so great after all**

A Reuters story (July 19, 2010) stated that:

***“A recent poll found 75 percent of Afghans believed foreigners disrespect their religion and traditions, 74 percent believe working with foreign forces was wrong, 68 percent believed foreign forces did not protect them and 65 percent wanted the Taliban and its leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, to join the government”.*** Given the overall messy conditions on the ground, I have no idea as to how reliable any poll taken in Afghanistan may be. But these numbers, even if inflated on the negative side, are truly worrisome. Holbrooke pointed out that only 10 per cent of the people are with the bad guys.

Whereas, the poll cited by Reuters would indicate that more than 70 per cent of the people ***believe that “we” are the bad guys, or at the very least that we are not be trusted.*** This does not imply, of course, that more than 70 per cent of the people are actively engaged in armed resistance against US forces; but it surely does not suggest support or confidence in what we are there to do. So much for progress, thus far, in “winning hearts and minds”.

**The challenge before us**

But there is lot more on the negative side. A The Wall Street Journal story (“*Petraeus Sharpens Afghan Strategy*”, July 22, 2010), reporting on some adjustments being made by General Davis Petraeus upon taking over as Commander in Afghanistan, commented that :

***“[...]. An effective counterinsurgency strategy can take years, and it remains unclear whether Gen. Petraeus approach will work in Afghanistan, where volatile tribal politics, a lack of infrastructure and rudimentary local security forces pose significant challenges.”***

## **The conditions in Afghanistan**

Well, note the passing comment that this counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan “*can take years*“, while the stated US goal is to start withdrawing at least some troops by July 2011. As for the “*significant challenges*” referred to in the article, they are a euphemism for “*incredible obstacles*“. Let’s see how the CIA World Factbook –this is our own US Government speaking– characterizes Afghanistan’s economy:

***“[.....].Despite the progress of the past few years, Afghanistan is extremely poor, landlocked, and highly dependent on foreign aid, agriculture, and trade with neighboring countries. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Criminality, insecurity, weak governance, and the Afghan Government’s inability to extend rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. Afghanistan’s living standards are among the lowest in the world. [Emphasis added].While the international community remains committed to Afghanistan’s development, pledging over \$57 billion at three donors’ conferences since 2002, the Government of Afghanistan will need to overcome a number of challenges, including low revenue collection, anemic job creation, high levels of corruption, weak government capacity, and poor public infrastructure***

**How poor is poor Afghanistan?**

Got that? And bear in mind that, in the context of Afghanistan, one of the poorest countries on earth, “*poor public infrastructure*“, does not mean an insufficient number of 4 lane highways, it means that there is almost nothing there. *Think of this: the installed electrical capacity of Afghanistan, a country with 29 million inhabitants, is smaller than the capacity installed in The Cayman Islands, a country with a population of 50,000. Yes, you got that right: 50,000 people in a high income, small Caribbean country have more electricity than 29 million Afghans.*

**Millions of illiterate children**

And other data indicate the magnitude of any effort aimed at improving economic conditions, a key component of an effective counterinsurgency strategy, based on the idea that you will “win hearts and minds” by demonstrating how you can create positive change for the local population.

Afghanistan is bigger than France, with a population of about 29 million. Of these, 42% are children below the age of 14. Due to poverty, their future is grim. Life expectancy is 45 years. And the chances of making things better for all these children are slim. The overall literacy rate is about 28%, and for girls a miserable 12%. What future can there be for an illiterate girl in a poor country in which women, because of custom and religious belief, are treated as second class beings? And what can the US do to seriously improve literacy, while providing economic prospects to millions of poor children? Overall, little. And in the short time, very, very little.

### **Poverty, corruption, ethnic strife, terrorism....**

A per capita GDP of about \$ 800 a year places Afghanistan towards the very bottom of world rankings: number 219 out of 227 listed. Add to this the internal divisions among at least 7 major ethnic groups and languages, a weak government, a flourishing narcotraffic (opium) that funds local criminals, war lords and the Taliban and you get the picture of the country that we are trying to modernize, and very fast at that, as we are fighting an insurgency which unfortunately causes the death of many civilians caught in the crossfires.

And yes, I almost forgot: **rampant corruption**. For instance, what do we make of the confirmed fact that billions of dollars leave the country every year? How can one possibly justify this exodus of capital from a poverty stricken nation that literally needs every penny that would come in? And it is in this environment that the Taliban-led insurgency has regained ground, proving to be an almost intractable pest.

And we want to defeat an insurgency –and we are in a real hurry to get it done fast– in this most intractable environment by sprinkling around some more troops and a few billions of dollars?

Well, Good Luck!

### **We cannot win**

I am not suggesting here that our goal of denying sanctuary to Islamic radicals in Afghanistan is a lost cause. But I am suggesting that this strategic objective cannot be achieved in the way envisaged by the administration which is based on modernizing (at least to a significant degree) the country in order to inoculate it from terrorists.

The Obama “Afghanistan Plan” created an incredibly tall agenda and thus a huge challenge for itself. A challenge that cannot possibly be met with the resources so far allocated, even if we include more troops and more money for development.

And certainly US goals cannot be met within the official time horizons, whereby we start moving forces out by July 2011; thus implying that about a year from now the US will be able to start handing over important responsibilities to supposedly capable Afghan entities, military and civilian. This scenario is highly unlikely. Nothing thus far indicates that the Afghan state will be capable to do much more a year from now. As the article quoted above says, counterinsurgency may take years. In fact I think that we are talking decades.

### **An alternative: rely on local power structures**

The issue here is that we have chosen a counterinsurgency strategy to achieve counter terrorism objectives. In principle, it may look good to “clean up” Afghanistan and fix it so that it will be inoculated against the temptations of radicalism. In practice, this is a fantastic objective that cannot be reached.

Is there an alternative? I have said before and I repeat now that we may be able to achieve our basic counter terror objective of denying the Taliban and al Qaeda a safe heaven in Afghanistan by entering agreements with local war lords and the power structures, such as they are, that they embody. And this choice is not because we want to fragment Afghanistan into tribal or ethnic enclaves, or because we like the war lords. It is because building up, almost from scratch, a strong and credible central Afghan state is just too complicated, unless we assume decades and unlimited resources to do the job.

### **“No Taliban”**

The agreement with the local chiefs would essentially say: *“We support you. We give you money, arms, and resources. On one condition: No Taliban. No al Qaeda. If you break this agreement we will deal with you”*. With US money, the local lords will strengthen their power, while hopefully providing a little better for their people. This would be the locally based anti-Taliban force –a force that, if we are straight with them, (“we shall support you, we shall give you arms”), would have a stake in resisting the insurgency. (Note that Gen. Petraeus is concocting something similar, taking the form of beefed up local militias. But it is a contradictory goal, in the context of the declared US strategy, to empower new local militias, while pursuing the parallel objective of building up the capability and reach of Kabul armed forces and police).

### **Messy but it might work**

All this may not be tidy and orderly; but it may work. The advantage of this approach is that it would rely heavily on local resources, with indirect US support; while allowing the US to reduce its visible presence, itself a negative factor that strengthens anti-foreign feelings and thus the resistance.

Of course, this looks messy. And this would not fit the nice, canonic, much beloved "text book" nation-building paradigm predicated on: 1) fixing the Kabul government, 2) creating capacity for all the line ministries, 3) investing in the economy, 4) improving revenue collection, 5) reforming the judiciary, 6) ensuring free elections, 7) eradicating corruption, 8) providing health care, 9) creating schools, etc.

### **To do things "right" may require decades**

The problem is that the tidy nation-building goals may require a generation or more of steady investments and a lot more fighting before we can see truly appreciable results: i.e. the modernization of a poor country now virtually in the Middle Ages. But, somehow the disconnect between lofty goals and the harsh reality on the ground is lost.

### **Agenda hostage to US politics**

The net result is that we have unachievable policy goals to which we have to add that all this grand strategy has to be accomplished within time constraints created by a restless US public opinion that wants "this thing" to end as soon as possible. And on top of that we have to add the additional constraints imposed on the operation by the US political calendar: *"Win and show soldiers headed home before the 2012 presidential elections"*. Hence the incoherent message whereby we redouble our efforts now and at the same time announce that we shall start packing next year. This would be fine if our goals were reachable within such a short time. But they are not. Talk about squaring the circle.

### **Win before the elections**

But in so doing, by defining goals that it cannot achieve, within time horizons that are almost laughable given the magnitude of the tasks, it seems to me that the Obama administration has painted itself in a corner. Its only way

out would be by engaging in fact manipulation, by inflating results and “declaring victory” next year, essentially lying to America and to the world.

### **This way we cannot achieve the goals**

My simple contention is that the Afghan policy goals as stated are unattainable within the time frame indicated and relying on the resources so far allocated. General David Petraeus may be a genius and the best we’ve got when it comes to counterinsurgency. But he does not have divine powers.

### **America: no more money for distant wars**

And if the above were not enough, let’s consider this: The US Government is nearly broke. With mounting political pressures to cut public spending, the Afghanistan operation, rightly or wrongly, is beginning to look more and more like an extraordinary luxury that we can no longer afford –at least for the average voter who may not understand the possible long range ramifications of anarchy and what an eventual Islamic take over in Afghanistan may bring, including more attacks against the US homeland.

And this is why the administration created an arbitrary but politically savvy short time horizon for this campaign. Message to the wary voters: *“Not to worry. We’ll be done in no time”*. But, while clever, this is really a bad idea. Fighting a messy guerrilla war is bad enough. Fighting a war with the proviso that you have to win by a due date, because the country will not support it much longer is probably too much –even if you have David Petraeus in charge.

As for our Allies willingness to help us, beyond the inadequate levels provided so far, well this is another sorry chapter in this story which I’ll save for another time.



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# Economic Aid to Pakistan?

**WASHINGTON** – Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was in Pakistan just recently on a mission aimed at showing US political good will and steadfast support for the country's economic development agenda. Building on top of an already substantial 5 year aid package totaling about 7.5 billion approved last year, Clinton announced an additional 500 million to be delivered to Pakistan. So, it seems that we have more money going to a deserving critical partner in a conflict where we need to succeed in order to defeat al Qaeda and recreate regional stability. Is this good news? Well, unfortunately much less than it may appear.

## **Serious money?**

First of all let's place this multi-year aid package in context. Even in this world in which we have gotten accustomed to figures exceeding hundreds of billions or trillions to measure almost anything worth noticing, (Wall Street losses, General Motor and Citigroup bailout, federal stimulus package, TARP program, Fannie and Freddie, you name it), a foreign aid package totaling several billions, especially if aimed at a developing country in which American dollars should go much farther, seems respectable. It seems an amount large enough to foster credibility for US policies towards our embattled ally, Pakistan, facing a hardened insurgency in a large area right at the border with Afghanistan; along with ongoing fundamentalist violence across the rest of the country. But is this package really big enough to make a difference in Pakistan? It is sizable yes; but probably not that meaningful, given the reality of a very large and still poor nation.

## **Pakistan at a glance**

Pakistan is a huge country, almost twice the size of California, with a population of about 177 million, and this is more than half the US population of about 300 million. In the words of the US Government (*CIA World Fact Book*):

***“Pakistan, an impoverished and underdeveloped country, has suffered from decades of internal political disputes and low levels of foreign investment”.***

Sure enough, the same document also points to progress in getting more people out of poverty in recent years. And yet the script continues by stressing the systemic constraints of an underdeveloped economy still largely dependent on low value textile exports. Furthermore, Pakistan is a young country in which 40% of the population is composed of children under 14, while half the population is illiterate, with 2 girls out of 3 having no access to schools.

### **The economy**

If we look at the economy as a whole, Pakistan has a GDP of 168 billion, if measured according to official parity, or a higher one of 449 billion if we look at purchasing power parity. This national wealth, though, divided by the huge number of people, gives a paltry per capita GDP of 2,600 a year, placing Pakistan at number 170 out of 227 countries listed. Not rock bottom, but close. And, if one considers large income disparities, with great wealth in the hands of very few, the conditions of the poor are clearly a lot worse than this average would suggest.

### **Can this aid make a difference?**

So, Pakistan is a country twice the size of California, with more than half the population of the US, with an under

developed economy, widespread poverty, millions of children without schools and thus little hope for their own future economic advancement; all this compounded by lack of basic services, such as potable water. A recent study indicates that up to a third of the population, (this is more than 50 million people), lack access to safe drinking water. As a consequence, 630 children die, every day, from diarrhea.

### **Corruption and bad governance**

Last but not least, Pakistan has a traditionally clannish and elitist power structure, with a proven record of corruption and decision-making processes ruled by the imperatives of patronage as opposed to real public policy considerations. (A recent Google search for "*Pakistan corruption*" gave almost 6 million entries! Yes, almost 6 million, a popular subject, it seems). Corruption and bad governance is another serious impediment to development.

### **Add violence to the mix**

In all this, let us not forget the primary reason for US involvement in Pakistan: the festering wound of violent fundamentalism that has made several areas, especially the North West of the country, almost completely impenetrable, while it has reduced overall security in other areas, including Islamabad, the capital city, often targeted by terrorist attacks.

Clearly, a perception of widespread insecurity in an embattled developing country engaged in a counter insurgency while fighting terror groups is of no help in an overall effort to encourage investments and new enterprise –largely the purpose of the US aid package.

### **US: not so good at delivering value through aid programs**

Beyond all this, quite apart from these Pakistani internal problems, just to make things worse, we have to add that the

US Government has a pretty bad record in successfully delivering value for money through aid packages. American foreign aid mechanisms are complicated, bureaucratic, process driven, risk averse and quite often inefficient. This is in part because it is objectively very difficult to design and implement good programs. But, aside from that, lack of effectiveness is due to the low morale of an understaffed USAID (US Agency for International Development) bureaucracy, weakened by massive defections of skilled personnel over many years.

### **Widespread outsourcing**

This lack of in house professional resources has made USAID almost totally dependent on contractors to implement programs. This outsourcing requires oversight. And so programs are top heavy on administrative mandates, monitoring and endless reporting. All this means that a huge chunk of the allocated aid programs budgets is used to pay for procedures and the fulfillment of established protocols, as opposed to implementation. In the end, after subtracting all administrative costs, contractors expenses and profits, not much money is left for actual aid delivery. It is true that Secretary Clinton has placed development programs very high on the list of US foreign policy priorities and thus better results are to be expected down the line. Still, while reform is welcome, it is altogether unlikely that any changes being worked on now will have a short term impact on increased aid effectiveness to Pakistan.

### **Huge gap between needs and amounts of aid**

If we take all this together –the amount of money versus the needs of an enormous, poor country, coupled with the systemic inefficiencies that have plagued the delivery mechanisms from the US side– it should be clear that these aid packages announcements, however well intentioned they may be and however significant the figures may appear, have mostly a

political, feel good objective.

Aid is a way to reaffirm political support for the leadership in Islamabad. But, as far as concrete impact is concerned, not much there. And this means that there is also very little political benefit in terms of increased of US popularity among ordinary Pakistanis; most of them untouched by US aid programs.

### **Supporting Pakistan is a good objective, the tools are modest**

It is perfectly understandable that the Obama administration is trying and will try anything within its powers to shore up, help, support, you name it, this technically democratic Pakistani government, (in principle at least a big step ahead compared to the previous military government).

But it is also clear that Pakistan needs are gigantic, the amount of money provided by US tax payers, relative to needs, altogether modest; while the effectiveness in delivering results not at all a sure thing, given still unresolved systemic problems in effectively delivering aid. In short: problems enormous; money inadequate; aid delivery mechanisms inefficient.

### **The US has become much poorer**

And, if all this were not enough, US policy-makers will not be able to indefinitely dance around the basic fact that America is running out of money. Indeed, this effort at showing good will towards Pakistan, a crucial ally in the uncertain conflict against fundamentalism, via foreign aid, is taking place in the middle of a US economic crisis that is likely to turn into an economic realignment of historic proportions from which America will emerge as a diminished and far less competitive power on the world scene.

Simply stated, there is no more money, while we have to deal with crushing levels of debt, public and private. Unless the

US will be able to engineer a major, fundamental turnaround of its domestic economy, a turnaround that will recreate leadership in key high value sectors and, along with that, reestablish long term international competitiveness –a possible development, but not at all a sure thing– America has run out of gas.

### **Debt and more debt everywhere**

The US is now and will be saddled for several years, (even if we choose to believe the more benign scenarios), with levels of debt that have put America in the same boat of impoverished European spendthrifts, (at least in terms of ratios of public debt to GDP). In the meantime, efforts notwithstanding, the US economic engine is sputtering, now moving forward yes; but not fast enough to generate the vast amounts of fresh new wealth that will be needed to get us on a path of new investments, new employment generation and eventually sustainable levels of debt.

### **The deficit debate: cut foreign operations**

And public awareness of this huge debt issue has created alarm. A Recent TIME magazine poll indicates that the public is concerned with high levels of federal expenditures in the midst of all this debt. Americans want cuts. And where should we cut first? Yes, you guessed it: the war efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, (55% want this), and the overall defense budget (46% in favor).

Only small minorities would advocate cuts in politically ultra-sensitive entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare or education, even though the real money is there. Polls may change, of course; they always do. But it is difficult to believe that a country with a stubborn almost 10 per cent unemployment, a country in which half of minority children do not graduate from high school and in which access to public universities is becoming more and more difficult

will choose to cut social spending and start cheering expensive, protracted and uncertain foreign and security policies. Policies whose value to American security, (regardless of intrinsic merit), beyond a small circle of policy experts, is not at all well understood by the public at large.

So, in the end, the 7.5 or 8 billion dollars for Pakistan, as problematic as this aid is in terms of achieving anything worthwhile with it, defies gravity. It is not supported by the national fiscal realities and it has little, if any, public opinion support.

Do not expect more of the same in the years to come.

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## Happy Fourth America

WASHINGTON – I run into an old acquaintance in the elevator. A few pleasantries are exchanged. And his farewell greeting is: “Happy Fourth”. Appropriate, of course, as we are getting close to the Fourth of July. But I would like to think that something more meaningful is conveyed in what may otherwise appear as just ritualized wishes –something polite to say just because we are very close to Independence Day. Indeed, “Happy Fourth” may convey more.

### **Optimistic about The Fourth**

If we want to be optimistic, celebrating the Fourth of July is an opportunity to reflect on what was meant, so long ago, at the beginning of a novel experiment aimed at creating sustainable institutions of self-government. Think of it: the first attempt at creating a republic in the modern era. And this effort was supported by uncharacteristic faith in

enduring human wisdom, as success of self-government whose authority would rest on consent rather than force was largely predicated on the virtue of the citizens.

Indeed, The Declaration of Independence of July 1776 and the train of events that followed it represented the very first attempt in the modern era to give life, in a very practical way, to an elected government conceived as an instrument created to protect individual liberties. Such an idea up to that point had only been declared in books. Amazing that anyone really believed that this experiment based on the continuing ability to strike careful balances could come to life and then survive.

### **America is a Utopian Dream that came true**

It may appear odd, but we have to come to an understanding that the creation of America was and is the wishing into reality of what could only be a Utopian Dream—a Utopian Dream that, however, despite all odds survived the tests of real life application and overall became more real than unreal. Most Political Utopias either stayed just that, interesting dreams, perhaps, but only mental creations of imaginative individuals, or—much worse—they came to life as hellish manifestations of human perversion and madness.

### **Other Utopias not so good**

The still cherished 1789 French Revolution was theoretically about justice, of course; but justice to be realized through the gruesome physical elimination of entire social classes. At some point the revolutionaries thought that the best way of achieving their noble goals was by creating "Terror". In the end the whole thing collapsed, to be replaced by a new autocracy, with Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor. (The French had to try several times, before giving life to a viable modern republic not too long ago). And the connection between the sacred duty to kill in the name of a beautiful idea has been



the common thread of many Utopias, from Bolshevism to Nazism up to Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge.

### **Do humans have enough wits to manage self-government?**

The American Revolution was about obtaining freedom from foreign rule, of course; but this Revolution was meant as the necessary precondition so that a novel form of government, based on all those famous European writings on natural law and constitutionalism that all the leaders had studied and absorbed, could be created.

it was a Utopia in as much as the whole idea of self-government was premised on the assumed existence and self-perpetuation of a high degree of human maturity, reason, restraint and willingness to respect rules of fairness, coupled with the ability of always striking a reasonable balance between the rights of the majority and the need to prevent the majority from crushing the minority. How could one reasonably believe that such wisdom could exist?

### **“A Republic, if you can keep it” –Benjamin Franklin**

In truth, at the time many argued that such a high level of maturity might be hard to achieve and, if achieved, difficult to keep. But nonetheless they went ahead. Again, uncertainty about the success of the enterprise remained. Indeed, a few years after the Revolution, at the end of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention of 1787, Benjamin Franklin famously replied to someone who asked him what was it that the Convention had accomplished: “A Republic, if you can keep it”.

*And so Franklin tersely uttered that this New Republic, itself the child of the Revolution, was only a tentative accomplishment. It was there, but only as long as the citizens would have enough wits to understand its value and do what would be necessary overtime to keep it.*

### **Major flaws in the design**

And, of course, we do know that right at the beginning there were major flaws in the whole design. The obvious “original sin” at the very birth of America was the inability, at that time, to seriously deal with the glaring contradiction represented by professing the universal principle of human equality and the institution of slavery. And we know that it took almost a century and a bloody Civil War to legally rectify this sin; while it took another century to eliminate, at least formally, the segregation regime that in practice had the same effect as slavery.

Well, as imperfect as it is, the creature of the Utopian Founders is still much better than most other human concoctions in the sphere of government. Another Fourth of July gives us the opportunity to reflect on what is it that we have done and what needs change.

### **Education is a key ingredient**

Let me offer my thoughts. The Founders, as children of the European philosophy of the Enlightenment, had great faith in the power of *education both to lead men to achievement and to give them the intellectual tools to protect the very republican institutions that they were forging at the time.*

Impossible, they believed, to have people who are both ignorant and free. Knowledge empowers people in a healthy way, they thought. It gives them tools to better understand all things, including the actions of government and the ability to act against nefarious behavior.

### **Education for the good of man and the good of the commonwealth**

And, even though this was not explicitly stated as a “right”, it was obvious that for them the whole American experiment was predicated on the availability of education as the tool that enables the cultivation of the human spirit and the ability to improve our knowledge in all fields. There was for them a seamless continuity between greater knowledge of the physical

world and the progressive refinement of human sensibilities and sensitivities.

It is not accidental that among the Founders we have Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The latter well known as inventor, publisher and entrepreneur; while Jefferson was a dilettante scientist and an eternally curious man who built a huge collection of books, later on bought by the government thus becoming a key component of the early Library of Congress. Not an accident that both men are tied to the creation of institutions of higher learning. Not an accident that Jefferson cited his role as founder of the University of Virginia as an important personal achievement, while he did not mention his years as President of the United States.

**We lost the understanding that access of education for all is key**

The Founders understood all this. But their message has been lost along the way. While America made great strides in expanding the reach of education in earlier times, (think of the innovation of land grant universities, think of the G.I. Bill that sent masses of veterans to university after WWII), overtime our education system, as a whole, has declined in both quality and quantity –especially its backbone: public secondary education.

**“A Nation at Risk”?**

This is a fact that has been described and substantiated in many authoritative studies. The landmark 1983 report, *“A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform”* issued by the National Commission on Excellence in Education”, drew attention; but then the focus shifted elsewhere. And yet, the report famously stated that: **“If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war”**. Well, interesting rhetoric notwithstanding, the Nation

*at Risk report came and went and, almost thirty years later, we have not made much progress.*

### **Some focus on education and the economy**

When falling standards of education get attention this is only because some key business leaders, not without cause, point out the inevitable loss of economic competitiveness resulting from declining academic standards in America; while other countries have better results. The outcome, it is appropriately said, is that they will better than us at mastering complex technologies and processes, while we shall slowly fall behind. This is true.

### **Economic decline and more**

But, while accurate, this ominous warning and prediction of economic decline does not really capture the full value of education as the Founders intended it –and as we should intend it. While education is certainly about intellectual skills and the advance of scientific knowledge so that people will innovate and engage in ever more complex economic activities resulting in higher profits, our lives are not just about economic pursuits. Sure enough, a successful economy is essential, for without riches very little else is possible. But riches alone do not satisfy all our needs.

### **The promise of a good education**

And thus education should be about the broadening of the spirit and about the identification of those unique talents that provide substance and depth to that right of the “Pursuit of Happiness” indicated in the Declaration of Independence that we are about to celebrate once more. So education should provide skills but more importantly an avenue for self-discovery and for the growth of one’s own spirit. And, along this journey, the person will also discover the intrinsic value of liberty and of the republican institutions created to uphold it, while providing practical tools for managing the

commonwealth affairs.

This is a very tall order, no doubt, and this is why I call the whole exercise that started on the Fourth of July, 1776 an attempt to give life to Utopia. But, whatever the odds of lasting success, either we label the whole enterprise fanciful and abandon it, or we try and pursue the agenda set by the Founders as best we can.

### **American public education: not even the basics**

Yet, before we get too lofty, and engage in arcane debates about the best tools for self-discovery, let's review our landscape and acknowledge that, while we are failing to reach the aspired to depth of spiritual awareness, we cannot even do a decent job with the very basic stuff that should be expected as minimal education achievements in terms of literacy and other simple academic skills. Unfortunately, we have lost a lot of ground across the board in almost every sphere of public education.

### **No education, no "Opportunity"**

This, in and as of itself, is a betrayal of the spirit of 1776 that implicitly stipulated that for America to succeed, its citizens need to be educated. And the negative consequences of inadequate education are really great. Let's consider why. America, quite clearly was conceived as an egalitarian society; but only in a formal way, in the sense that there would be no individuals enjoying special status because of the accident of their birth. No aristocracy in America. Yet America was not predicated on any economic egalitarianism. It was believed that people would progress in life as far as their talent would carry them. But, quite clearly –and this circles back to the need to foster education– the cultivation and refinement of talent requires training and learning.

### **"Opportunity" is the magic ingredient**

And the cultivation of individual talent implies access to education and thus the existence of concrete, available "Opportunity" through schools. Indeed, meaningful, available "Opportunity" –intended here as access to the tools that allow meaningful self-expression through a variety of means– is the magic, secret ingredient of the American Dream. Indeed, for "America", conceived as a healthy environment in which all is possible, to become a tangible, practical reality for most people, there has to be at least a minimal level of real opportunity for all, regardless of their individual circumstances at birth. Formal, legal equality without real opportunity is almost meaningless. If only the rich have access to quality education, then there is nothing different about America: just another country in which social class is the key to almost anything; just another country in which "birth is destiny".

The great American stories of the "self-made man", although probably inflated in terms of the impression created as to the actual numbers of common people who truly "made it", are nonetheless real. And certainly upward social mobility has been more real in America than in countries in which birth, status, connections and political ties often prevail over individual talent and ingenuity.

### **Unfortunately in America for many "birth is destiny"**

But in today's America, just like in other traditional societies, there are barriers that cannot be overcome through hard work alone. Sadly enough, just like in more backward societies, we are confronted now, despite laws that prohibit discrimination, with a reality in which "birth is destiny". Millions of young people, having no access to real education, are trapped into marginalization or poverty that they have no real means of escaping.

### **Failed public schools**

Indeed, how can so many inner city kids have a real chance, unless meaningful, quality education is made available to them? Even those who want to, by virtue of their geographic locations that provide no real choices in terms of the schools they may be able to attend, are stuck with horribly insufficient public schools in which they learn almost nothing. Huge numbers do not graduate. Those who do graduate are often functionally illiterate or semi-illiterate and thus woefully under equipped to have a shot at higher education and all the opportunities that on average at least go along with college and post graduate degrees.

### **Charter schools to the rescue**

Well, there are some glimmers of hope in this otherwise grim landscape. The growing phenomenon of “charter schools” shows once again American Ingenuity at work. Charter schools are privately conceived and manned schools aimed at providing substantive education to those who otherwise would have no choice. Their relative success has encouraged local administrations to give them a chance. Parents are given the opportunity to send their kids there, regardless of location. So far, so good. But the fact is that the supply of good charter schools does not even remotely equal demand.

### **Charter schools and lotteries**

Brilliant film maker Madeleine Sackler ably portrayed this reality in her acclaimed documentary “The Lottery”. This film documents the stories of New York families that want to send their kids to charter schools, recognizing that this can be the only chance to good education and thus a better life for these children. But all these families have to face the obstacle of a lottery, legally mandatory when there are just not enough places in charter schools to accommodate all children who wish to attend them. The documentary also shows bigotry on the part of those who oppose the expansion of charter school seen at least by some as a cultural threat to

some kind of ethnic orthodoxy. (White people trying to open new charter schools like the “Harlem Success Academy” in predominantly Black Harlem are apparently not welcome).

### **Resisting change**

But the worst part is that from the story narrated in the documentary it clearly emerges that the teachers unions are defenders of the failed system, as opposed to fighting the good fight for higher standards of education and truly professional teachers. They oppose charter schools as a threat to their union monopoly, even when it is obvious that the schools they want to preserve are failing institutions that provide little if any value to the children.

### **The chance to have a meaningful future is still a “lottery”**

So, “The Lottery” shows us the real life travails caused by a failed public education system and the attempts at remedying these failures. But the very word used in the title –lottery–conveys how still unjust all this is. Given the scarcity of meaningful, coveted alternatives represented by a few charter schools, the future of many children is in the luck of the draw. For many of them their destiny and future station in life in some measure may be dictated by the outcome of the lottery. Those who cannot get into the charter schools are thrown back into the caldron of the failed public education.

### **In America we should do better**

Sure enough, better to have some charter schools than none. But it is truly shameful that in this supposedly modern society, here in America we tolerate a tax payer funded public education system of such low quality that people had to come up with remedial alternatives aimed at filling huge gaps. It is quite obvious that in the many circumstances described in the documentary, “Opportunity” is denied. Opportunity is only partially restored via the good will of those behind good



charter schools initiatives, But opportunity is nonetheless denied by the complete inadequacy of public educational institutions created –let us not forget– for the sole purpose of providing that basic shared cultural and knowledge common ground that all should have in order to be full participants in our society.

### **President Obama's efforts and their limits**

True enough, President Barack Obama has raised the profile of public education reform and many worthwhile initiatives have been launched by his administration through Arne Duncan, his thoughtful and well meaning Secretary of Education.

But we know that public education in America is still essentially a local government responsibility and thus much of the action has to take place at that level. Furthermore, the essentially negative role of teachers unions in impeding reform and in impeding the necessary goal of creating a truly accountable and highly qualified “army of teachers” is not part of the national conversation. If the teachers do not teach, or at least do not strive to reach higher standards, while their unions staunchly defend the status quo, the battle is already lost. The teachers unions are key constituencies of the Democratic Party. Will Obama have the courage to confront them? No clear sign of that, for the moment.

### **Not enough awareness about the failures of public education**

Sure enough there are many responsibilities here, including chronic under funding of education and consequent low salaries for teachers that do not encourage good people to pursue teaching as a profession. Worse yet, an apathetic general public does not grasp the gravity of the situation, starting with parents who do not seem to fully appreciate the damage done to their children by failing public schools.

The parents portrayed in Madeleine Sackler documentary who hope and pray that their names will be called the day of a

charter school lottery certainly understand all this. But, while this film helps us focus on this national failure, all this may not be enough to change the tone of the national conversation; while we cannot expect charter schools alone to magically remedy our nationwide systemic educational failure. Do the American elites, the pundits, the policy-makers get how bad all this is?

### **With real education in America we can restore opportunity**

Again, as we celebrate the originality and the good intentions underpinning the American experiment, let us remember that there is no American uniqueness without real opportunity for all. And a good education is certainly the indispensable tool to provide avenues for opportunity to all children.

The Founding Fathers clearly recognized the value of education as a pillar of both viable republican institutions and as the engine of human and economic progress. Just as they did, we have to recognize that if we fail to have at least decent, if not excellent, schools, America as we would like to think of it may not last much longer, neither its free institutions nor its economic prowess.