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## 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 allocate scarce resources, as the country attempts to reduce its budget deficit without jeopardizing 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 institutions that talented and well-motivated individuals can make enormous 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, motivation, 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 improving 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 seniority, 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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\*J. Hamre, *Science* **338**, 304 (2012). †D. Acemoglu, J. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (Crown Publishers, New York, 2012).