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Subject: just a little self-promotion

I know I'm not supposed to lift my head from the QDDR, but just thought you would like to see this – it's for all the ideas you wanted promoted when you picked me. AM

The Crossroads Nation

By DAVID BROOKS

Bill Clinton used to talk about building a bridge to the 21st century. President Obama talks about laying down a “new foundation.” But Clinton was always vague about what the land on the other side of that bridge was going to look like, and Obama is vague about what edifice is going to go on top of that foundation.

They are vague because nobody is clear about what sort of country America is going to be in 2030 or 2050. Nobody has quite defined America's coming economic identity.

In thinking about this question, it probably helps to start at the beginning. Five hundred years ago, agriculture was the major economic activity. One hundred years ago, it was industrial production. Now, of course, we're living in an information age. Innovation and creativity are the engines of economic growth.

Howard Gardner of Harvard once put together a composite picture of the extraordinarily creative person: She comes from a little place somewhat removed from the center of power and influence. As an adolescent, she feels herself outgrowing her own small circle. She moves to a metropolis and finds a group of people who share her passions and interests. She gets involved with a team to create something amazing.

Then, at some point, she finds her own problem, which is related to and yet different from the problems that concern others in her group. She breaks off and struggles and finally emerges with some new thing. She brings it back to her circle. It is tested, refined and improved.

The main point in this composite story is that creativity is not a solitary process. It happens within networks. It happens when talented people get together, when idea systems and mentalities merge.

Now imagine you are this creative person in the year 2010, 2025 or 2050. You are living in some small town in Ukraine or Kenya or some other place, foreign or domestic. You long to break out and go to a place where people are gathering to think about the things you are thinking about, creating the things you want to create.

If you are passionate about fashion, maybe you will go to Paris. If it's engineering, maybe it'll be Germany. But if you are passionate about many other spheres, I suspect you'll want to be in America.

You'll want to be in the U.S. because English has become the global language. You'll want to come because American universities lead the world in research and draw many of the best minds from all corners of the earth.

You'll want to be there because American institutions are relatively free from corruption. Intellectual property is protected. Huge venture capital funds already exist.

Moreover, the United States is a universal nation. There are already people there with connections all over the world. A nation of immigrants is more permeable than say, Chinese society.

You also observe that America hosts the right kind of networks -- ones that are flexible and intense. Study after study suggests that America is one of those societies with high social trust. Americans build large, efficient organizations that are not bound by the circles of kinship and clan. Study after study finds that Americans are not hierarchical. American children are raised to challenge their parents. American underlings are relatively free to challenge their bosses. In this country you're less likely to have to submit to authority.

From this story you can see that economic power in the 21st century is not going to look like economic power in the 20th century. The crucial fact about the new epoch is that creativity needs hubs. Information networks need junction points. The nation that can make itself the crossroads to the world will have tremendous economic and political power.

In 2009, Anne-Marie Slaughter, now director of policy planning at the State Department, wrote an essay for Foreign Affairs in which she laid out the logic of this new situation: "In a networked world, the issue is no longer relative power, but centrality in an increasingly dense global web."

Slaughter's essay was titled "America's Edge." That is apt. Americans are now in a depressed state of mind. As China and India rise, nearly two-thirds of Americans believe their nation is in decline.

In fact, the U.S. is well situated to be the crossroads nation. It is well situated to be the center of global networks and to nurture the right kinds of networks. Building that America means doing everything possible to thicken connections: finance research to attract scientists; improve infrastructure to ease travel; fix immigration to funnel talent; reform taxes to attract superstars; make study abroad a rite of passage for college students; take advantage of the millions of veterans who have served overseas.

The nation with the thickest and most expansive networks will define the age. There's no reason to be pessimistic about that.