

SNG-How to win the war-11-26-18

How to win the war

By Jim Nowlan

In a recent column, I mused about how we are in a virtual war with China for economic dominance. I observed that because of century-old humiliations wreaked on that proud “middle kingdom” (center of the earth) by the U.S. and European nations, China would use any forthcoming dominance to exact revenge. I promised to provide policy proposals to combat the Chinese quest.

(The column strayed from my usual Illinois-focused writing, yet at age 77, I find myself speculating frequently about the really big issues. I’ll return to Prairie State observations next week.)

Individuals and nations are driven by our DNA to play “king of the hill,” in our incessant drive for “fitness.” You will recall from the childhood game that this requires not only climbing toward the pinnacle of the leaf pile or snow mound, but also pulling others above you off their perches.

So, we should not be surprised that China is playing the game, with a vengeance. Nor should we think the U.S. has been above all that. After all, in my lifetime, the U.S. has toppled several governments from their perches, in Chile, Iran and several Central American countries. Our nation did this for apparent purposes of protecting our place at the top of the hill from global threats, e.g. Communism.

I am no fan of Mr. Trump, yet I think he has a better understanding of the “realpolitik” (brass knuckle politics) in which we are engaged at present than did my friend Mr. Obama. Our recent president hoped that reaching out to China would result in more civil behavior from that nation.

Life is a struggle. Always has been; always will be. And the people playing big politics king-of-the-hill are nasty. This includes certainly Xi Jinping in China, who has ruthlessly used his control of China’s judicial system to eliminate “corrupt” potential threats to his power.

Mr. Trump also knows “nasty.” He grew up in the world of New York City real estate development, which can also be nasty, nasty.

So, if there is anything to my musings, what can the U.S. do to maintain our economic dominance in the world?

I contend the U.S. needs, for example, to engage in a war-footing commitment to radically improve our educational achievement; reverse the growth of the American Underclass, which saps our nation’s vitality, and aggressively recruit the brightest, most creative minds to our shores.

I am pessimistic we have the will to take on the daunting task of real educational reform—such as longer school days and years, and elimination of summer vacations, where so much learning is lost, to be replaced with several shorter breaks throughout the year.

As for the American Underclass, I mean the growing numbers of our fellow citizens who are socially and psychologically lost, unprepared for the information age, and often dependent on government. I don’t know that America’s leadership knows how to reverse the trend; I sure don’t feel confident I have answers.

The fundamental, positive policy tools we have are behavioral incentives and sanctions. For example, reward serious study and educational achievement, and hard work. Discourage single parenting by those unprepared to handle the responsibilities.

Third on my list—recruiting the absolute best minds—may be the simplest to achieve.

The greatest strength we have is that our country is absolutely the best place in the world to create, go into business, thrive, and make money. Only a sliver of 1 percent of humans are true creators via invention, discovery and then the development of valuable services and products.

And many of tomorrow's creators, not all of course, live beyond our boundaries.

Just as NBA scouts can apparently identify future stars as early as 8th grade, we need scouts who would scour the earth for such intellectual talent. Offer them research dollars and the opportunity to flourish here. We will all benefit. The wealth can be shared.

My biggest worry is that Americans will blithely ignore this challenge of economic competition as a kind of war. After all, bullets aren't whizzing overhead nor bombs cratering nearby.

Throughout the 1930s, Winston Churchill exhorted the English to respond to Hitler's re-arming of Germany, in vain. Then and now, the public wants to avoid sacrifice, especially when the danger is not clear and present.

Life is a struggle. Staying on top of the hill is a continuing economic war. Are we up to it?