

The Evening Sun

Think Like an Immigrant

By Steve and Cokie Roberts | April 15, 2010

“To keep my edge, I must think and act like an immigrant.” Those are the words of Omid Kordestani, who was born in Iran, moved to California as a teenager, and became a senior vice president of Google. “There is a special optimism and drive that I have benefited from and continue to rely on that I want all of you to find,” he told a graduating class at San Jose State. “Immigrants are inherently dreamers and fighters.”

It’s important to keep Kordestani’s words in mind as Congress contemplates a new effort to pass immigration reform. The debate focuses mainly on the 12 million undocumented workers now in America, but another group is equally important: the highly educated immigrants who want to live and work in this country but are driven away by our stupid and self-defeating policies.

Every economist agrees — skilled immigrants are job-creating engines. Moreover, ideas have no boundaries. The United States will not prosper by making cheaper goods than Bangladesh; it will only grow richer by remaining a Mecca for innovation and imagination. Right now, we’re locked in a worldwide competition for the best and the brightest minds from around the world, and we’re falling behind.

Vivek Wadhwa, a Duke economist, tells USA Today, “For the first time in American history, we are experiencing the brain drain that other countries experienced.” Adds Suren Dutia, CEO of TiE Global, a worldwide professional network, “If the country is going to maintain the kind of economic well-being that we’ve enjoyed for many years, that requires having these incredibly gifted individuals who have been educated and trained by us.”

Other countries get it. A recent article in the Canadian magazine Maclean’s — “Stealing talent from Uncle Sam” — details how Canadian officials are recruiting foreign-born professionals in California. Their cause is greatly aided by our cumbersome and complicated visa process. “The longer Uncle Sam takes to get his house in order, the better it is for us,” the magazine says.

There are two ways for these “incredibly gifted individuals” to stay in the United States: employment-based green cards, which permit permanent residency, or H-1B visas, which allow companies to hire foreign-born graduates of American universities. Both programs, hamstrung by strict limits and lengthy delays, are in desperate need of revision.

Farsighted legislators such as Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer and Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham have recently proposed awarding green cards to immigrants

who receive advanced degrees here in science, engineering or technology. President Obama has endorsed the idea, and Sen. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader, has promised to take up immigration reform this year.

The chance for legislative action before the election remains slim, but cities across the Rust Belt are not waiting for Washington to act. They see immigrants as the answer to their economic decline and are trying to attract as many as possible.

As the Detroit News writes, "Bring us your fired-up, your hungry-to-succeed, your Ph.D.s. Bring us your entrepreneurial foreign born, who were 189 percent more likely to start a business in 2008 than those of us born stateside."

Immigrant-bred companies such as Yahoo and Google garner a lot of publicity, but computer scientists are not the only immigrants who create jobs. Many of them grow the economy store by store, block by block. Richard Herman, co-author of a new book, "Immigrant, Inc.," argues that his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, "needs the fresh optimism and pluck of new immigrants" to replace the people who are fleeing the city every day. He quotes bank executive Craig Thomas: "As people leave, it really does take international folks to come in, open up stores and fill up neighborhoods."

That's exactly what's happened in St. Louis, Mo., where 70,000 Bosnians have settled in recent years. Writes the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "They have bought homes and started businesses. They have stabilized a broad swath of the city and have begun to move to the suburbs. In short, they've done what waves of German, Irish and Italian immigrants did before them."

American history has been scarred by outbursts of anti-immigrant sentiment. In the 1840s, the Know-Nothing Party flourished by denouncing Irish and German Catholics. In the 1940s, we interned Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast. Today, that virulence is directed at Hispanics and Muslims and fueled by modern-day Know-Nothings such as Lou Dobbs and Pat Buchanan.

The haters were wrong then, and they're wrong now. The "dreamers and fighters" who constantly renew our strength and our spirit have always blessed America. We need them more than ever.