

## **Forum Spotlight: U.S. must conquer fiscal, talent, job deficits to thrive**

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First is the suffocating burden of debt. The public debt is \$8 trillion, of which America is in hock to foreign nations for \$3.2 trillion (41 percent owed to China and Japan). Add the money borrowed from various trust funds like Social Security, Medicare, etc., and the total debt is \$12.6 trillion, projected to rocket beyond \$19 trillion by 2020.

It's hard to grasp the meaning of these figures. Think of dollars in terms of seconds: A million makes 12 days; a billion amounts to 32 years, and a trillion seconds are equivalent to 31,688 years.

The nation's wealth is being squandered. We're in a financial free-fall. Yet our elected representatives can't stop spending, so the Obama administration is appointing a bipartisan commission to recommend solutions. But in the end, it's we the people who have enabled unconstrained spending. Every interest group wants a piece of the pie. As one politician wryly commented, "The people like their gravy. Who can vote against that?"

Gone are the funds needed to repair decaying infrastructures. Potholes are a fact of life. While American cities have aged, sparkling new ones around the globe have risen. These are the rival economic magnets for high-wage industries.

Second, the U.S. lacks the bench strength needed to attract high-wage industries. Twenty years ago, America was where the talent was. But we have tumbled from being the first in the world in high-school graduation rates to 16th and in college graduation rates to 14th. American 15-year-olds rank 25th in math and 24th in science.

Given the humongous national and state debts, we're cutting back on developing our greatest resource - human talent. Teachers are being laid off, class sizes increased and school days reduced. Meanwhile, China provides 42 more days of education each year than

what American students receive.

Al-Qaida couldn't come up with a better script to undermine America's prosperity. In fact, the U.S. Census Bureau notes that median family income has actually decreased since 2000.

Third, where are the jobs? Fifteen million Americans are out of work. Another 9 million have been reduced to part-time. More importantly, high-wage jobs are needed, yet they are eroding, not growing. "We have a dearth of talent," says Larry Lin of Intel. He reports that high-tech corporations are being forced to locate to other parts of the world for the talent they need.

These crises were decades in the making, albeit recently exposed by the recession. It will require hard decisions, courage and leadership to solve them, but first they must be taken seriously. It begins locally.

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