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A Question Of Priorities

By Sarwar A. Kashmeri

For the Valley News

Regardless of your position on the Iraq war, there's no denying its damaging impact on America's long-term economic health.

I was reminded of this recently during a conference organized by the Leadership Upper Valley program that is coordinated by the Greater Lebanon Chamber of Commerce.

The year-long program identifies individuals with leadership potential and brings them together over weekend retreats and conferences to educate them on the issues, opportunities and problems that affect the Upper Valley.

The individuals are assumed to be among the area's future leaders, and the program is aimed at equipping them to fulfill their responsibilities.

The conference was held at the Lebanon offices of Hypertherm Inc., an international leader in manufacturing steel cutting equipment.

Hypertherm's cutting technology uses laser and plasma torches that operate at nine times the surface temperature of the sun. The company maintains its global leadership because of its research and development spending and constant innovation.

During the question-and-answer period following a presentation by Evan Smith, Hypertherm's general manager, I asked him to imagine being in Washington, D.C., with a group of powerful congressional committee chairmen. He has the opportunity to describe the biggest business impediment that Hypertherm and other high-technology businesses face.

What would he say?

Without hesitation, Smith said, "Immigration reform."

"The issue for us is that the U.S. simply isn't producing sufficient engineers, particularly in certain specialty areas, to meet the need," he said.

“You've no doubt read about this generally. We've felt it most recently in recruiting microprocessor programmers. Our best candidates were non-U.S. nationals, but to do this, you go up against visa allocations and long waiting lines. We pushed through and hired them, but it is a very difficult process. So, either the U.S. needs to help re-energize engineering education, or liberalize immigration policy. It's a global economy,” Smith said.

Hypertherm's concerns are reflected nationwide. But they are of particular relevance to the future of the Upper Valley's economy, given that so much of its future depends on the creation of environmentally clean, high-technology businesses that draw on the area's ability to leverage assets such as Dartmouth College, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, and the growing cluster of high-technology businesses.

The \$4.5 million, 48,000-square-foot Dartmouth Regional Technology Center, a business incubator located at Centerra Technology Park in Lebanon, and the National Center for Precision Manufacturing that is being established in Windsor, are but two of many examples of how the area is being propelled toward a future of cutting-edge technology and high-tech businesses.

But all of this innovation and drive will come to naught if the businesses spawned from the incubator, college and hospital complex cannot continue to expand for lack of qualified workers.

And, in today's world, that means engineers, scientists, mathematicians, physicists and computer science specialists.

In its landmark 2005 Skills Gap Survey, the National Association of Manufacturers warns: “The vast majority of American manufacturers are experiencing a serious shortage of qualified employees, which in turn is causing significant impact to business and the ability of the country as a whole to compete in a global economy.”

The report said countries with rich educational heritages -- India, China and Russia, for example --graduate millions more students each year from college than the United States does.

“These highly educated individuals are actively participating in the development of innovative new products without regard for historical barriers, such as geography -- thanks to technologies such as broadband, inexpensive Internet-ready laptops, and collaborative tools,” the report said.

Senators from both New Hampshire and Vermont have done wonders procuring federal money to jump-start innovative ventures in both states.

But unless the skill gap is closed, these efforts may not be able to fulfill their long-term promise of transforming the area's economy with the kind of jobs that America will need to compete with the powerhouse economies of the Far East.

Which is why the decision to spend \$300 billion dollars -- so far -- on the war in Iraq (not to mention the billions more that will be needed each week for the foreseeable future to continue operations and to repair and replace wrecked equipment) may well come back to haunt us within the next decade.

Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor in the first Bush administration, said the Iraq war has sucked all the oxygen out of America's foreign policy.

A greater tragedy may yet unfold if the Iraq war has also sucked the oxygen out of the country's ability to direct government resources into transforming our education system, thereby leaving Hypertherm and other high-tech companies without the highly skilled assets they need to continue to grow and create jobs.

Sarwar Kashmeri is the author of the recently released book [America & Europe After 9/11 and Iraq: The Great Divide](#). He is a fellow of the Foreign Policy Association, a strategic communications adviser, and lives in Reading, Vt. He can be reached via e-mail at sarwar@kashmeri.com.

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