

By Rep. Rush Holt

For most of the last 150 years, America's leadership in science, technology, engineering, and innovation was unquestionable. Our nation invented the light bulb, the telephone, the Model T, the personal computer, and the Internet. We discovered penicillin, abolished polio, and helped to rid the world of smallpox. America's capacity for innovation was not only the envy of the world; it was also the driving force behind the world's economic progress, helping to lift billions of people out of poverty. The sky seemed to be our limit—and, as Neil Armstrong proved in 1969, even that limit could be breached.

So what changed?

There is no doubt that America remains capable of extraordinary innovation. We are still the nation of Google and Facebook, of the iPhone and the Chevy Volt. Yet we are no longer the world's unquestioned leader. In 2009, the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation found that five other nations had pulled ahead of the U.S. in overall innovation and competitiveness—and we are falling further behind. Over the last decade, every one of these competitors has improved its innovation capacity faster than America has.

I suppose we should be heartened that other nations are making their own strides forward in science and technology. If a scientist in China were to cure AIDS tomorrow, it would be not merely a victory for the Chinese people; it would be a victory for all mankind. Yet America must not be content to piggyback on other countries' inventions. We have never accepted dependency. We have been proud of our status as a world leader, and we can still be the world's engine of economic and social advancement.

In 2005, the National Academies laid out the problems facing America's future competitiveness in an influential report titled *Rising Above the Gathering Storm*. The report described a nation at risk of falling behind our competitors: not educating our children in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; not inventing at the same pace as other nations; and not producing new jobs in high-technology fields. The report was a call to action, and for a brief moment, it captured the attention of scientists, economists, think tank experts, government officials, and lawmakers.

And then the moment passed. Despite the attention devoted to the Gathering Storm report, most of the goals it laid out remain unaccomplished. The problems it described remain unresolved—in many cases, even unaddressed.

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