

## A White House Fantasy

On October 24 I tweeted

US potential dissipating nyr.kr/1aHB5Uc  
“Efficient allocation of resources” bit.ly/1ifPCuk  
Coincidence? - I think not

The first link is to an article documenting abysmal U.S. performance, relative to its international peers, on three measures of education and intellectual performance. The second link is to an article describing a record 13 billion dollar settlement J. P. Morgan will pay in fines for an impressive variety of misdeeds and shenanigans.

How are these connected? Both are signs of rotten values. What motivates the behavior leading to these outcomes? High status is attached to accumulated wealth, however obtained. But for intellectual or cultural achievement, as a rule, not so much.

(I am expressing myself crudely here - this is *not* a scholarly meditation, but an extended tweet!)

In response, @OdysseanProject asked

I'd love to know:  
What's the first thing you would do about this if [you were] in [the] White House?

which of course I interpreted to mean, if I got elected President. Now clearly that's not going to happen, so the logic of this question is a counterfactual on the order of “If 2 + 2 were equal to 5, how would you dance the fox trot?” Still, it's a fun challenge to think about.

A President faces many complicated, many-faceted issues and constraints, about which my understanding is primitive. Physics is much easier! Clearly I'd want to consult with people whose wisdom I admire and respect in these matters, such as the economists Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, the scientist/politicians Bill Foster and Rush Holt, and interesting younger people such as Noah Smith and Matt Yglesias. Some specific big issues I'd want to address are: how we can provide basic, minimal economic security to everyone, so that people can feel empowered to explore and risk (and also just because humans deserve dignity, and our nation is wealthy enough to provide it); how can we be more open to the contributions of immigrants; how can we invest in infrastructure and other “common wealth”, to do justice to the enormous opportunities science and technology put before us.

Coming back to the question, the *first* thing I'd want to do is to demonstrate, in a dramatic and public way, a commitment to different values. I'd start with a grand festival celebrating science, engineering, and the arts – with the President in attendance. I'd make it clear that this was the beginning of a continuing series of events, including weekly lectures by leading

figures in two versions: directed to students, and then to experts, followed by dinners and artistic performances at the White House. I'd also announce some grand initiatives, such as a space-based gravity wave detector, and an ambitious search for evidence of extraterrestrial life (extrasolar habitable planets), and some prizes that I'd persuaded a few billionaires to sponsor, for meeting specific milestones in (for example) battery technology, solar energy conversion, carbon capture, life extension, and quantum computing.

When I was growing up we were involved in the Cold War. That was a frightening episode, and it had many unfortunate consequences, but it also provided a sense of national purpose. In particular, there was a broad consensus that we must treat humble people with respect (since we had competitors, who claimed to do that!) and to support science and technology (since we had fearsome competitors who definitely did that!)

Through a sense of grandeur and possibility, I'd hope to inspire what William James called "the moral equivalent of war", but with lethargy and stupidity, rather than another group of people, as the enemy. In any case, I'd throw a heck of a party.