

Yepsen: State should set sights on becoming world-best in four areas

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Iowa could learn a lesson from an epic skirmish in the Civil War battle at Gettysburg. Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain commands Union regiments from Maine. He is at the end of the Union line and holds a mountaintop - Little Round Top - the Confederates need to win the battle. Chamberlain's forces repel attack after attack at great costs. Finally, when it appears as if one more Confederate assault will overrun their position, he divides his forces, spreads out his lines and orders a final, downhill bayonet assault into the rebel army.

It proves a brilliant maneuver, one that sweeps the aggressors from the field and saves the day. Chamberlain's actions offer lessons that apply in life beyond the military. That is especially true today, when Iowa governments, many businesses and lots of individuals are in desperate straits. Great adversity requires new strategies and tactics from everyone. It requires not playing a traditional defense. Yes, we may lose with the gamble, but we are no worse off than if we hadn't tried.

And, like Chamberlain, we may just win. Iowa needs to borrow a page from Chamberlain's book right now. Faced with great adversity, we must change positions, adopt new plans and execute new tactics. Chamberlain wasn't only aggressive. He had a plan. Iowa needs one, too. Governments, individuals and businesses need them. I am tired of Iowans settling for second-best. I am tired of Iowa's shyness and apology for not being the best. So in this, my final column as a writer for the Register, I'll devote a few closing remarks to the plans I think Iowa needs to make.

As we begin, I'm reminded of something Bob Ray used to say when he was governor: We have our problems, but they're not so great we can't solve them. Looking at the problems facing other states, ours aren't nearly as bad. Next, we have to plan to be the best in the world. It's no longer good enough to consider ourselves the best in the county or the best in the Midwest or the best in the country. The goal of every enterprise - government or private - and of every individual, must be to be the best in the world at what they - or we - are trying to do. Make the best products. Deliver the best services. Win the international competitions. Set the standards.

There are two reasons to strive for this excellence. First, we are all part of a global economy. If what we're doing can't compete globally, then the quality of life here will erode. Second, there is psychic benefit to being the best and in striving to be the best. We sometimes have a hangdog, apologetic attitude about ourselves and our state. The more we can lay claim to being the best at something, the happier we will be. A renewed pride in Iowa and Iowans can begin.

Setting the standard as being "the best" will also set Iowa apart. It conveys to ourselves and our children that we should never settle for second best in anything. Every company, every school, every athlete, every government should make being the best in the world their goal, and they should find ways to measure their progress toward that goal. To achieve all this, we need some plans. We need them in our businesses, our personal lives and in our governments. Over the years, state government has had several. Often, their suggestions go nowhere, but sometimes they nudge an idea or two along. The last was a strategic plan Gov. Tom Vilsack ordered up when he became governor in 1999. It's time for another.

Since doing a few things well is always a trait of good leadership, we should focus this plan on four important "E's" facing Iowa - education, the economy, the environment and efficiency of governments. We should spend a year developing 10-year plans to make Iowa world-class in each. We can hear from experts, listen to one another, do studies and haggle over what we want to do. We can look at what others are doing around the world, set standards to measure our progress and draft bills and business plans for each.

Educational excellence

Within a decade, let's create the best pre-K-16 school system in the world. Education is the ultimate stimulus package. Iowa's schools are adequate. They are not good enough. We are resting on our laurels. In recent weeks, there has been a lot of focus on the economy, bailouts and stimulus packages. That's fine. Those things are important in the near term. But our children need to be able to compete with the kids from other

countries for the jobs of the future. This country needs to regain the knowledge and creativity edge that helped build the middle class.

David Leonhardt, writing recently in the New York Times Magazine, says: "Education - educating more people and educating them better - appears to be the best single bet that a society can make." "More-educated people are healthier, live longer and, of course, make more money. Countries that educate more of their citizens tend to grow faster than similar countries that do not. The same is true of states and regions within this country. Crucially, the income gains tend to come after the education gains," he wrote.

In the abstract, no one argues with improving education. But try to make even the most minor changes to schools in Iowa, and you risk a firestorm. But change is required, and we need leaders willing to make it. There are lots of options for change. My favorite is eliminating tuition at community colleges. Perhaps we need to eliminate tuition at all public-education institutions for students who graduate high school with good grades in four years.

Economic growth

Let's set the goal of having one of the highest per-capita incomes in the country within 10 years. A healthy, growing economy is important because it tends to solve a lot of other problems. As has been said by others, the best social program is a good job. Iowa's per-capita income last year was \$38,600, ranking 32nd among the states. The average of the top-five states was \$56,000. That means within a decade we need to raise our income levels 45 percent to be in the top tier - and that assumes they don't grow.

Once we are in that league, we'll be in the running to have one of the highest incomes among non-oil-producing countries in the world. (According to the CIA, last year Denmark ranked sixth at \$67,387, Ireland fifth at \$68,574 and Switzerland seventh at \$64,974.) Education reform is a first step to long-term economic growth. Beyond that reform, Iowa must focus on doing everything it can to expand incomes and create jobs. Taxes and regulations must be competitive, yet robust enough to keep Iowa an attractive place to live. That is a difficult balance that requires constant attention.

We must encourage and nurture entrepreneurs. We must become risk takers and be supportive of those who do take risks to start new firms or develop new ideas. That will be hard. One of the biggest flaws in the Iowa character is our failure to take risks or encourage those who do. We need to focus on improving the daily quality of life. We also need to market ourselves - to others and to ourselves. And we must be more tolerant of others because diversity is not just a matter of political correctness. It is necessary to attract people to live and work here.

Environmental protection

Let's set a goal to have the cleanest environment in the country within 10 years. The cleanest air. The cleanest water. The best soil- and energy-conservation practices. We've had education governors. We've had sporadic focus on growing the economy. For some reason, we've lacked a similar focus on the environment. Creating a clean environment will create green jobs, but it will also make Iowa more attractive as a place to live and do business. As individuals, we don't have to wait for governments to take the lead. Are we saving energy in our homes and businesses? Why can't every Iowan plant one tree a year for the next 10 years or join volunteer programs to clean out our waterways?

Efficiency of governments

Many of the first three goals - education reform, improving the economy and bringing back the environment - will require government action. Yet we have limited money to spend. Iowa's governmental structures were devised for a rural state generations ago. They are inefficient and ineffective today and use money that could go to higher priorities.

For example, we don't need so many layers of elective officials or governments. We don't need so many middle managers. We need to devote more of the dollars we already spend on education to the classroom. The current state budget crisis, which is arguably the worst since the Great Depression, should give policymakers the backbone to make dramatic structural changes to governments. - - - There are lots of other

problems that lend themselves to 10-year plans for world-class excellence. Some, like health care, are getting attention at the federal level. Iowa can do what it can to help people lead healthier lives. (Many of us need to lose weight and get into shape.)

Others, like reconstruction of our public infrastructure, is a priority that affects all others: A good system of roads and bridges is necessary for a healthy economy. Students learn better in good facilities. Good sewers are needed to clean the environment. The reconstruction of Iowa's public infrastructure could be done over the next 10 years. It will take borrowing money, spending wisely and raising gasoline taxes. Much of this work is something we can do ourselves. Others, like development of light-rail service, will require federal help.

And making plans to be the best isn't just something government can do. Only I can get on that treadmill. We often put too much focus on what government does and not enough on what individuals, the religious community or business is doing. For example, the state budget is \$6 billion. The gross state product - the value of all the goods and service produced here - is around \$130 billion. Government is important, and the policies it sets affect all sectors, but it's not the whole ball game. All state and local government spending counts for only 12 percent of the GSP.

Businesses, individuals and private groups such as Iowa's formidable religious community can make their own plans for excellence, and in doing so, they will improve the larger Iowa community. Developing and executing all these plans will not be simple, easy or cheap. And, it will be difficult to ask tradition-bound Iowans to make changes. But like Col. Chamberlain on that hilltop, the adversity we face requires us to adopt new plans and go on the attack.

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