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Shanghai Expo shows a can-do China

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Before it closes in October, 70 million people - the vast majority Chinese - will visit the World Expo in Shanghai. Like the Beijing Olympics and staged on the epic scale we have come to expect from China, it has a subtext: China has arrived, and in a big way.

A large-scale video presentation in China's pavilion trumpets national goals, and the country's success in meeting them. Cities is the exposition's theme, but the real message is clear: China has a vision for its future and is actively building on it.

The contrast with the USA National Pavilion speaks volumes. First, there almost wasn't one. Our government couldn't fund an exhibit, and only heroic efforts by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and corporate sponsors saved the day, ensuring a U.S. presence to showcase American culture, values and business at a global event. That's the good news.

But, unlike China's display, our exhibit conveys no captivating American vision. An introductory video presents ordinary Americans greeting the Chinese people, but dwells on their inability to speak Chinese. A big-screen video in 4-D, titled "The Garden," follows, showing an aging, colorless urban neighborhood filled with dispirited people. A young girl plants a flower in an abandoned lot, only to have it crushed by vandals - twice. A flood devastates her garden. The people watching her appear indifferent, but eventually they step up, help create a park, and everyone seems happier. Nice.

Portraying Americans as people who can work together for the common good is a fine message. After the war in Iraq and with the war in Afghanistan in full swing, a people-to-people soft sell might be just the thing. But this is our best shot at connecting with tens of millions of Chinese, at a time when China is thinking about its place in the world. Sadly, our message fails to inspire, and at best, gives an impression of benign ineptitude.

Could this be true about our nation? While American businesses continue to be at the global forefront (Cisco and GE have two of only three corporate pavilions at the Expo), the government seems to have lost its way.

America is waging ideological battles at every level of government, as the economy founders. We face a crisis of will and purpose. Local governments are overcommitted, and struggle with weak tax revenues and rising public employee health care and pension costs. State government is in an even worse mess, with budget deficits stretching to the horizon and high and persistent unemployment. Federal deficits are also heading for the skies, and despite some promising investment in renewable energy, most federal stimulus money has been spent on programs with few tangible results.

China, in contrast, is investing most of its economic stimulus spending in long-term infrastructure, including a national high-speed rail network. China's government has a vision and is doing its best to make things happen.

Our governments lack a compelling vision, and the hunger and drive to make it real. Too often, for our leaders, infrastructure, growth and job creation are an afterthought - relegated to the realm of things that are presumed to happen, without understanding how they happen.

State infrastructure projects are frozen because Sacramento's budget impasse precludes their financing.

The Bay Area stands at risk of losing billions in federal funds for high-speed rail because a few cities oppose its passage through their communities. The region's closed military bases have stood empty for more than a decade now, as cities and developers fail to agree on financially viable plans.

In San Francisco, political opposition to almost any development kills too many projects.

This isn't an argument for Chinese-style governance. Hell-bent government actions without democratic checks can produce monumental mistakes - witness China's horribly degraded environment. But the question of will and economic vision is real.

China's average annual growth of 10 percent over the past three decades is a testament to its drive. We are at a turning point - in the Bay Area, in California and as a country. Faced with uncertainty, we need to shift gears, innovate and craft a narrative that reflects our values and our strengths - and helps rebuild our economy.

When the world's nations gather for the next expo, what will our story be?

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