

OP-ED COLUMNIST

More (Steve) Jobs, Jobs, Jobs, Jobs



By [THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN](#)
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The most striking feature of Barack Obama's campaign for the presidency was the amazing, young, Internet-enabled, grass-roots movement he mobilized to get elected. The most striking feature of Obama's presidency a year later is how thoroughly that movement has disappeared.

In part, it disappeared because the Obama team let it disappear, as Obama moved to pass what was necessary — the economic stimulus — and what he aspired to — health care — by exclusively playing inside baseball with Congress. The president seems to have thought that his majorities in the Senate and the House were so big that he never really had to mobilize “the people” to drive his agenda. Obama turned all his supporters into spectators of The Harry and Nancy Show. And, at the same time, that grass-roots movement went dormant on its own, apparently thinking that just getting the first African-American elected as president was the moon shot of this generation, and nothing more was necessary.

Well, here's my free advice to Obama, post-Massachusetts. If you think that the right response is to unleash a populist backlash against bankers, you're wrong. Please, please re-regulate the banks in a smart way. But remember: in the long run, Americans don't rally to angry politicians. They do not bring out the best in us. We rally to inspirational, hopeful ones. They bring out the best in us. And right now we need to be at our best.

Obama should launch his own moon shot. What the country needs most now is not more government stimulus, but more stimulation. We need to get millions of American kids, not just the geniuses, excited about innovation and entrepreneurship again. We need to make 2010 what Obama should have made 2009: the year of innovation, the year of making our pie bigger, the year of “Start-Up America.”

Obama should make the centerpiece of his presidency mobilizing a million new start-up companies that won't just give us temporary highway jobs, but lasting good jobs that keep America on the cutting edge. The best way to counter the Tea Party movement, which is all about stopping things, is with an Innovation Movement, which is all about starting things. Without inventing more new products and services that make people more productive, healthier or entertained — that we can sell around the world — we'll never be able to afford the health care our people need, let alone pay off our debts.

Obama should bring together the country's leading innovators and ask them: "What legislation, what tax incentives, do we need right now to replicate you all a million times over" — and make that his No. 1 priority. Inspiring, reviving and empowering Start-up America is his moon shot.

And to reignite his youth movement, he should make sure every American kid knows about two programs that he has already endorsed: The first is National Lab Day. Introduced last November by a coalition of educators and science and engineering associations, Lab Day aims to inspire a wave of future innovators, by pairing veteran scientists and engineers with students in grades K-12 to inspire thousands of hands-on science projects around the country.

Any teacher in America, explains the entrepreneur Jack Hidary, the chairman of N.L.D., can go to the Web site NationalLabDay.org and enter the science project he or she is interested in teaching, or get an idea for one. N.L.D. will match teachers with volunteer scientists and engineers in their areas for mentoring.

"As soon as you have a match, the scientists and the students communicate directly or via Skype and collaborate on a project," said Hidary. "We have a class in Chicago asking for civil engineers to teach them how to build a bridge. In Idaho, a class is asking for a scientist to help them build a working river delta inside their classroom."

The president should also vow to bring the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship, or NFTE, to every low-income neighborhood in America. NFTE works with middle- and high-school teachers to help them teach entrepreneurship. The centerpiece of its program is a national contest for start-ups with 24,000 kids participating. Each student has to invent a product or service, write up a business plan and then do it. NFTE (www.NFTE.com) works only in low-income areas, so many of these new entrepreneurs are minority kids.

In November, a documentary movie — "Ten9Eight" — was released that tracked a dozen students all the way through to the finals of the NFTE competition. Obama should arrange for this movie to be shown in *every* classroom in America. It is the most inspirational, heartwarming film you will ever see. You can obtain details about it at www.ten9eight.com.

This year's three finalists, said Amy Rosen, the chief executive of NFTE, "were an immigrant's son who took a class from H&R Block and invented a company to do tax returns for high school students, a young woman who taught herself how to sew and designed custom-made dresses, and the winner was an African-American boy who manufactured socially meaningful T-shirts."

You want more good jobs, spawn more Steve Jobs. Obama should have focused on that from Day 1. He must focus on that for Year 2.