You received a Fulbright to study in Finland. What research did you conduct while in Europe?

I held the Fulbright Bicentennial Chair in American Studies at the University of Helsinki. My research project is called Renaissance America: A Best-Practices Blueprint for Enhancing U. S. Prestige and Competitiveness. It is a follow-up to my book entitled Lament for America: Decline of the Superpower, Plan for Renewal (2010). I am examining best practices in the public and private sectors at home and abroad to ascertain whether they can be successfully adapted at the state and national levels in the United States (for example, K-12 education in Finland or healthcare systems in a variety of European countries).

What is the nature of your argument?

Most Americans believe that the rest of the world can learn a great deal from U. S. practices. Far fewer think that we have much to learn from the rest of the world. I do not agree with this assessment. In my book, Lament for America, I identify 15 major “fault lines” which we must confront and overcome in the U. S. These fault lines include: (1) Beltway follies; (2) corrosive campaign financing systems; (3) massive government debt; (4) burgeoning external debt and dwindling importance of the U. S. dollar; (5) unsustainable entitlement explosion; (6) unaffordable health care; (7) faltering educational system (8) plight of the American household; (9) a new Gilded Age and Wall Street’s debacle; (10) infrastructure deterioration; (11) intergenerational strife and festering cleavages; (12) dysfunctional immigration system and failure to attract the best and the brightest; (13) haphazard federalism; (14) general apathy and paucity of civic engagement; and (15) an overextended U. S. foreign policy. I believe that we can learn a great deal from how other countries deal with each of these fault lines. By learning and adapting, we can enhance the overall competitiveness of the United States.

One of your research areas is America in Decline. What do you mean by that?

I argue in Lament that, in terms of global reach, the United States was history’s leading superpower in 1945. Today, we are definitely a superpower in relative decline measured by our dwindling share of global GDP, exports, direct investment, manufacturing, education outcomes, etc. The big question is how modest or steep our relative decline will be in a world characterized by a potent combination of globalization, unprecedented technology change, and creative destruction. We must wake up and realize that not only are we facing much stiffer competition from other nations or groups of nations, but that we have settled for mediocrity at home in a variety of areas (the so-called fault lines).
How worrisome is this decline?

Some relative decline is to be expected because 1945 was an unusual period in that the U. S. alone accounted for half of total global production, had by far the superior military capability, and held a monopoly on atomic weapons. However, we may be hastening our own decline because of problems at home. For example, we expend over 40% of what the entire world spends on defense and health care. Our governmental policy process has become quite dysfunctional in Washington, D.C., helping to explain why our government debt now exceeds $15 trillion and our tax code is filled with “special favors” provided to rich and powerful interest groups. Unless we can maintain a vibrant economy and a responsive political system, we will hasten our own decline and exercise diminishing influence in global affairs.

How big of a problem is it if America is in a decline?

The U. S. has been a relatively benign superpower and has helped to bring a significant amount of order and stability to the international system as a whole since 1945. In addition, over the past few centuries, the ascendancy of the trans-Atlantic world (Europe and the U. S.) has promoted cherished values such as democracy, capitalism, freedom of religion, the rule of law, and individual rights. If the U. S. were to forfeit its superpower status, it is difficult to predict what would happen in terms of global stability and so-called “Western” values. What can we do to stop the decline? How can we fix it? Solve the problem of the fault lines, adapt best practices in a variety of areas, and work across national borders to solve problems common to humanity.

Recently, you spoke in France on a panel discussing, “The United States and Europe, Two Different Systems and a Similar Challenge: How to Succeed in a Global Economy.” Can you describe this experience?

Yes, I was invited to speak at the French Ministry of Finance at a conference dealing with how France is coping with globalization. I found that most of the speakers were very worried about France’s future competitiveness in an era of globalization. I warned about the dangers of “trans-Atlantic shift and global shift,” with the Asian Development Bank’s emphasis that if current trends continue, Asia will in 2050 account for over half of the world’s population, GDP, trade, and investment. I offered some solutions, including dealing with and overcoming domestic fault lines, and suggested that the U. S. and EU work together to create a major free trade zone and promote greater collaboration in emerging technologies and the application of these technologies in manufacturing and other productive economic activities.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I believe that we are entering a period unprecedented in human history. The rate of change will be rapid as we double the human data base every year and eventually every day. The typical American will be engaged in life-long learning and constantly involved in learning, unlearning, and relearning. Most will change jobs on a fairly regular basis. The competitiveness of individual nations will improve or decline surprisingly quickly. Brainpower will be at a premium and by far the most important “natural resources” will be the human resource. The big question is how well-prepared the United States and its citizens are to compete in this world of globalization, unprecedented technology change, and creative destruction.

I hope that we will experience an American renaissance, but it will require major changes in policy, shared sacrifice and discipline, and a renewed vision of how to succeed domestically and internationally.