The Technology Cult and Obama's Agenda

Contributed by Peter Crabb
07 January 2009

Among the "changes we can believe in" proposed by President-elect Barack Obama is his support for a 21st century technological infrastructure. The plan calls for spending hundreds of billions of dollars on hardware, software, and regulation, all orchestrated by a new Chief Technology Officer.

The tone of Obama's technology agenda is frankly evangelical. According to his transition team, "Barack Obama understands the immense transformative power of technology and innovation and how they can improve the lives of all Americans." Technology is the new religion and offers the salvation we've been seeking.

This is nothing new. Presidential politics have long been intertwined with technology in ways that are both symbolic and concrete. In a shrewd move intended to shift public attention away from the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion, John F. Kennedy announced a startling plan to put astronauts on the moon. Thus began the cult of space flight and the squandering of enormous resources on frivolous engineering spectacle. And we were in awe.

Consider the message of transformation and salvation embedded in just two of the technofixes proposed by Obama's transition team:

(1) "Use health information technology to lower the cost of health care."

Oh, really? Anyone who works with IT knows that more technology always means increased costs. The most cost-effective and scientifically proven route to good health is diet, exercise, and a clean environment--not more technology! Ironically, the additional computer work promised by the Obama plan will mean more carpal tunnel syndrome, more eye strain, more obesity, and more back problems for the lucky folks who are hired to implement it.

(2) "Advance the next generation of biofuels and fuel infrastructure, accelerate the commercialization of plug-in-hybrids, promote development of commercial-scale renewable energy, and begin transition to a new digital electricity grid. This investment will transform the economy and create 5 million new jobs."

And you probably thought the way to go was to conserve energy, use fewer cars, and produce energy locally! This plan for increased growth in energy use will only accelerate our rush toward economic and environmental collapse.

Implicit in these proposals is the demand that we have blind faith in technology. Questioning the means of production is simply off the table. When economies were based on animal power, there probably weren't a lot of PETA activists making noise about animal rights, just as when economies were based on slave labor there probably weren't a lot of John Browns agitating for abolition. In the same way, our present economy based on energy-intensive technology forbids critical inquiry into the wisdom and morality of how we are making our livings. Technology self-evidently works, so why look a gift machine in the mouth? [Try this exercise: go to the IT department where you work and ask, "Does technology really save time and effort? Does it really solve more problems than it creates? Isn't all of this stuff harmful to the environment and our health?" I bet they look at you like you like you are from Mars.]

At the risk of blasphemy, my question is, "If technology does work, to what end?" Engineers, of course, ensure that technologies do what they are intended to do. Beyond the box, though, is a whole cascade of unintended ecological and behavioral effects that receive no attention at all. Did Henry Ford foresee the pollution, the noise, the landscapes devastated by roads, and the routinized carnage that his cars brought us? Probably not. But he could have had he only asked a few simple questions.

There was a brief moment in history when the U.S. government actually paid some attention to the social and environmental consequences of technologies. Congress's short-lived Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) evaluated technologies in terms of their appropriateness for government administration and public welfare. The OTA did not quite have a consumer protection mandate, but it was definitely an attempt to understand the public implications of new technologies. Unfortunately, the OTA was defunded in 1995 by the Republican Revolution led by Newt Gingrich, darling of the military-industrial complex. It is noteworthy that there is no mention of technology assessment in Obama's technology policy statement. Have faith.

If government won't question technology, what about scientists and engineers? They are in an excellent position to test for the broader ecological impacts of technologies. But they don't. Like the typical teenage gamer, professional scientists and engineers are true believers. It wouldn't occur to most of them to question whether a technology is good for society or the environment because they depend for their livelihoods on a constant stream of bigger, better, and more expensive software and equipment. Those who do dare to raise doubts about technology quickly find that the doors are closed to research funding and publication in journals.

The acolytes are doing their jobs splendidly on behalf of the technology cult. Unsustainable technology thrives on unquestioning faith, active recruitment of young people, and marginalization of nonbelievers. While people are lost in their states of technobeatitude, the sobering reality will be a headlong march toward more energy use, more nonrenewable resource depletion, more pollution, more pavement, more habitat destruction and species extinction, more surveillance, more bailouts and give-aways at taxpayer expense, and more technotyranny by government and industry.

If there is one silver lining in all of this, it is that the enormous budget deficit that Obama inherits from his predecessor may very well make spending on these projects impossible. We can only hope.

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Further reading:

OTA Archive:

access.gpo/ota

"Technology Traps", by Peter Crabb:

culturechange.org

The Obama-Biden Transition Team Agenda: Technology

/change.gov/agenda/technology_agenda