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Political Adaption to a Technology Surfeited Society: Comment

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COMMENT

BY JOHN A. WEESE

I MIGHT start out by saying that, of the papers I have heard, this is the one with which I find myself in substantial agreement. I heartily concur that the creation of the CRS is necessary to provide Congress with the technological help which it so greatly needs.

One of the subjects touched on by Mr. Huddle with which I have some familiarity is that of the automobile industry. He mentioned, for example, the study of the Chrysler product that the Chrysler Motor Car Company went through in 1953 or 1954, in which it was decided that what the country really wanted was a more sensible car, one that would get better gas mileage, one that was easy to get into and out of, one that was comfortable to sit in and so on. This conclusion was reached after making a survey of homeowners, asking each householder, "What kind of car do you really want?" The answer they got was that the householder wanted a sensible vehicle.

One of the other automobile manufacturers was conducting a survey at the same time, and he was going door to door but asking the question in a different way. Instead of asking the householder, "What kind of an automobile do you really want," he would ask, "What kind of an automobile does your neighbor want." The answer, of course, was that the neighbor wanted lots of power, big chrome, big fenders, and so forth. Unfortunately, the second automobile manufacturer, when he produced a vehicle with these characteristics, sold a whale of a lot more cars and made a lot more money.

In all of these talks on technology, there is a danger of crying wolf when the wolf is really not there. I was pleased to see that Dr. Huddle points out that the management of technology is the problem and not technology itself. Of course, we should all have the freedom to conduct investigations to try to provide the pool of knowledge that is required. If we are to have technological progress, and to apply it to our social systems wisely, then it is imperative that we have the best technological information that can be obtained.

The statistics that arise out of this are rather interesting. Dr. Huddle points out that in our country we are turning 3,000 acres per day of agricultural land into suburban developments. I have hurriedly made some calculations along that line, and if my figures are correct, it will be about 2,250 years before we reach the stage of total suburbia.

I am aware of course that not all land can be used for agricultural purposes. I also should point out that the rate of conversion of land is probably not static; it was probably substantially less than 3,000

acres per day a decade ago. So the rate of increase is not constant, and probably my projection of 2,250 years, is indeed long. However, it is rather interesting to put this phenomenon into perspective.

Other aspects of studies brought out in Dr. Huddle's paper on pollution of the environment, are also interesting. The issue of *Scientific American* which has just arrived this month points out that sophisticated measurements of the level of oxygen in the atmosphere do not reveal any difference between the measurements that were made in the 1900 to 1910 era and those made recently, with very few exceptions. The apparent effect of man's activities on that particular element, at least, appears to be somewhat minimal.

I would now like to return, if I may, to Dr. Huddle's discussion of the automobile industry. Automobile safety, of course, is something about which people in engineering and technology are very much concerned. It is certainly a more complex problem than that of simply producing a safer automobile. There are many other problems that go along with it. It is interesting to study, for example, the little ad that appeared in *Time* magazine on the blood alcohol levels for drunken driving. This was a real revelation to me. It seems that, according to that particular article (if you read between the lines), approximately .15 percent alcohol content is required to make a person legally intoxicated. In my weight bracket, that meant that one had to consume nine cocktails in one hour, which struck me as being a rather phenomenal amount. There are some countries in Europe, and I believe Norway is one of them, that have very stringent laws regarding consumption of alcohol and driving. That touches upon one of the other items you mentioned in your paper, namely, that if you are going to put very stringent regulations on traffic laws, the responding cry of the public will be something to behold. I think the American Association of Tavern Operators or whatever, would be rather bold in their resistance to legislation of that type.

It is possible, of course, to design automobiles that are considerably safer than the ones that are on the road right now. We can design collapsible structures for automobiles; we can make it possible for people to survive crashes that they do not survive at the present time; but we cannot install seat belts in an automobile and then make it mandatory that the person wear the seat belt. Personally, I wear the seat belt every time I get into the car, but I cannot get my wife to wear hers no matter what I do and I have now given up harping at her.

Joseph Coates has mentioned several times the difference between the fundamental idea in law, of getting at the nub of the issue, *i.e.*, deciding the issue and resolving the problem, and the philosophy used by engineers or technologists of trying to devise a system within a set-up of restraint. In relation to safety requirements, the automobile is

an interesting example of this point. If you change the price of automobiles slightly, particularly if it is a change relative to the rest of the market, it puts you at a terrible disadvantage as far as selling is concerned. The automobile market is highly competitive and if you are going to make changes providing for safety features, the changes have to be made in such a way that other manufacturers will be forced to follow the same criteria, and add a similar expense to their budget.

There are further considerations to be made beyond the influence of economic factors on the development of technology. I find the proposal for the network of assessment of functions of agencies, including technology assessment, to provide early warning of consequential impacts of technology, to be very interesting. The consequences of technology, of course, are not always apparent even to those of us working in technology. This is often an extremely complicated matter. I am sure that the people who devised DDT, for instance, certainly did not anticipate that DDT would have the persistent effects that have resulted from its use. In an editorial in the Nov. 5, 1970, *Denver Post* entitled "Science — Our Only Hope," it was pointed out that the chemists who developed DDT and its related insecticides won Sweden's Nobel Prize for their achievements in organic chemistry. Now, because of its long life and totally unexpected side effects, DDT is banned in Sweden and many other nations. Chemists are now hard at work developing specific methods for destroying harmful insects without harming any other forms of life. I think that this is one of the resources of technology that should be kept in mind as we contemplate the role technology will play in the future. I share Dr. Bowers' conviction that we will survive the next decade. It has always struck me that man is a most cunning and able creature when it comes to survival. I have no doubt that with the proper impetus, mainly our own survival, we will be able to figure out how to continue the species.

Dr. Huddle also commented on the young man who said, "Clean up the air, that's all I ask, it's as simple as that." This type of statement is very common about our country today. We have had similar confrontations on our own campuses. I really wonder if we were to clean up the air, stop the war in Viet Nam, and release Bobby Seale and all the other political prisoners, whether all the problems associated with the unrest of our youth would really disappear. I suspect they would not.