

January 19, 2014

Charles Krauthammer takes off on the boundless cynicism of the president.

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Not his? America is at war and he’s America’s commander in chief. For the soldier being shot at in the field, it makes no difference under whose administration the fighting began. In fact, three out of four Americans killed in Afghanistan have died under Barack Obama’s command. That’s ownership enough.

Moreover, Gates’s doubts about Obama had begun long before. A year earlier, trying to understand how two senior officials could be openly working against expressed policy, Gates concluded that “the most likely explanation was that the president himself did not really believe the strategy he had approved would work.” This, just four months after Obama ordered his 30,000 troop “surge” into Afghanistan, warning the nation that “our security is at stake . . . the security of our allies, and the common security of the world.”

The odd thing about Gates’s insider revelation of Obama’s lack of faith in his own policy is that we knew it all along. Obama was emitting discordant notes from the very beginning. In the West Point “surge” speech itself, the very sentence after that announcement consisted of the further announcement that the additional troops would be withdrawn in 18 months. ...

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Craig Pirrong at Streetwise Professor posts on Putin's latest kiss to Iran.

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... Syrians are paying a dreadful price for Obama's narcissism every day. The entire region is paying a price, because the festering sore in Syria is the host to myriad jihadists who range from the bad (the Islamic Front) to the terrible (the Al Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front) to the utterly bestial (ISIS/ISIL). The US and its allies (notably Israel) haven't paid the price yet, but Obama has sowed the wind, and we will reap the whirlwind in due course. An empowered, messianic Iran, with Russia providing money and cover, and convinced that the US is a paper tiger, is likely to take actions that will unleash a devastating sequence of events. It's a matter of when, not if.

But Obama will have secured peace in our time: or his time, more precisely. His legacy will be secured, and any malign consequences that occur in 2017 and beyond, well, those will obviously not be his fault. He gave us peace, after all, and if war comes, it will be because some lesser being screwed up.

Farcical tragedy. Tragical farce.

Daily Beast London Editor **Nico Hines** has the courage the U. S. media lacks. Hines posts on Brit opinions about the president.

Sir Hew Strachan, an expert on the history of war, says that the president's strategic failures in Afghanistan and Syria have crippled America's position in the world.

President Obama is "chronically incapable" of military strategy and falls far short of his predecessor George W. Bush, according to one of Britain's most senior military advisors.

Sir Hew Strachan, an advisor to the Chief of the Defense Staff, told The Daily Beast that the United States and Britain were guilty of total strategic failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Obama's attempts to intervene on behalf of the Syrian rebels "has left them in a far worse position than they were before."

The extraordinary critique by a leading advisor to the United States' closest military ally comes days after Obama was undermined by the former Defense Secretary Robert Gates, who questioned the President's foreign policy decisions and claimed he was deeply suspicious of the military. ...

Ed Morrissey posts on the Senate's bi-partisan committee report on Benghazi.

... One does not need a name at the top of this report to know where responsibility rests for this massive failure. Hillary Clinton ran State, Leon Panetta ran Defense, and David Petraeus ran the CIA. But the distributed nature of the failure indicts the Obama administration and Barack Obama himself, too. The White House is responsible for interagency coordination, for one thing, especially when it comes to national security and diplomatic enterprises.

However, Obama's responsibility extends farther and more specifically, too. The reason that eastern Libya had transformed into a terrorist haven in the first place was because of the Obama-led NATO intervention that deposed Moammar Qaddafi without any effort to fill the security vacuum his abrupt departure created.

Four months before the attack on the consulate in Benghazi, Daniel Larison warned that the vacuum left by that 30,000-foot intervention not only meant trouble for the West in eastern Libya, but throughout North Africa as al Qaeda and its affiliates entrenched themselves. Sure enough, al Qaeda infused itself into a Tuareg rebellion and almost topped Mali, an effort which France belatedly stamped out with a boots-on-the-ground intervention – with those boots transported in part by the US Air Force. At the time, the Financial Times called Mali “among the most embarrassing boomerangs” of American policy, specifically noting “the blowback in the Sahel from the overthrow of Colonel Moammar Gaddafi in Libya.”

The policies and actions of the Obama administration in Libya left behind a failed state, and the incompetent handling of security and readiness afterward left four Americans to die needlessly. The buck stops at the top for this mess.

Joel Kotkin, normally writing on economic geography, has written a provocative piece on failures of technology.

Technological advances have slowed from revolutionary to incremental, with a focus more narcissistic than expansive and with the rewards concentrated in ever-fewer hands.

Maybe it's my age, but, somehow, the future does not seem to be turning out the way I once imagined. It's not just the absence of flying cars, but also the lack of significant progress in big things, like toward space colonization, or smaller ones, like the speed for most air travel or the persistence of poverty.

Indeed, despite the incessant media obsession with technology as the driver of society, it seems we are a long way from the kind of dramatic change that, say, my parents' generation experienced. Born at the end of the horse-and-buggy age, they witnessed amazing changes – from the development of nuclear power and the jet engine to the first moon landing.

In contrast, my children's experience with technological change is largely incremental – a shifting of digital platforms, from desktops to laptops to tablets and iPhones. The new raft of minidevices are ingenious and much more powerful than even the high-end desktop computers of a decade ago. But this wave of technology is not doing much except, perhaps, to make us ever more distracted, disconnected and obsessed with trivia.

As one former Facebook employee put it succinctly: “The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads. That sucks.”

One clear sign of our technological fail: the stagnant, or even declining, living standards for most Americans. New technology is not creating much-cheaper and better housing, nor is it reducing poverty or creating a new wave of opportunity for grass-roots businesses. In fact, the current “tech boom” has done little to improve incomes much outside a few stretches of the Bay Area, a handful of college towns, and overhyped city media districts. ...

Washington Post

How in good conscience?

by Charles Krauthammer

By early 2011, writes former defense secretary Robert Gates, [he had concluded](#) that President Obama “doesn’t believe in his own [Afghanistan] strategy, and doesn’t [consider the war to be his](#).”

Not his? *America* is at war and he’s America’s commander in chief. For the soldier being shot at in the field, it makes no difference under whose administration the fighting began. In fact, [three out of four](#) Americans killed in Afghanistan have died under Barack Obama’s command. That’s ownership enough.

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The odd thing about Gates’s insider revelation of Obama’s lack of faith in his own policy is that we knew it all along. Obama was emitting discordant notes from the very beginning. In the West Point “surge” speech itself, the very sentence after that announcement consisted of the further announcement that the additional troops would be withdrawn in 18 months.

How can any commander be so precise so far in advance about an enterprise as inherently contingent and unpredictable? It was a signal to friend and foe that he wasn’t serious. And as if to amplify that signal, Obama added that “the nation that I’m most interested in building is our own,” thus immediately undermining the very importance of the war to which he was committing new troops.

Such stunning ambivalence, [I wrote at the time](#), had produced the most uncertain trumpet ever sounded by a president. One could sense that Obama’s heart was never in it.

And now we know. Indeed, this became hauntingly clear to Obama’s own defense secretary within just a few months — before the majority of the troops had arrived in the field, before the new strategy had even been tested.

How can a commander in good conscience send troops on a mission he doesn’t believe in, a mission from which he knows some will never return? Even worse, Obama ordered a major escalation, expending much blood but not an ounce of his own political capital. Over the next four years, notes Gates with chagrin, Obama ignored the obligation of any commander to explain, support and try to rally the nation to the cause.

And when he finally terminated the surge, he did so in the [middle of the 2012 fighting season](#). Militarily incoherent — but politically convenient. It allowed Obama to campaign for reelection proclaiming that “[the tide of war is receding](#).”

One question remains, however. If he wasn't committed to the mission, if he didn't care about winning, why did Obama throw these soldiers into battle in the first place?

Because for years the Democrats had used Afghanistan as a talking point to rail against the Iraq War — while avoiding the politically suicidal appearance of McGovernite pacifism. As consultant [Bob Shrum later admitted](#), “I was part of the 2004 Kerry campaign, which elevated the idea of Afghanistan as ‘the right war’ to conventional Democratic wisdom. This was accurate as criticism of the Bush Administration, but it was also reflexive and perhaps by now even misleading as policy.”

Translation: They were never really serious about Afghanistan. (Nor apparently about Iraq either. [Gates recounts with some shock](#) that Hillary Clinton admitted she opposed the Iraq surge for political reasons, and Obama conceded that much of the opposition had indeed been political.) The Democratic mantra — Iraq War, bad; Afghan War, good — was simply a partisan device to ride anti-Bush, anti-Iraq War feeling without appearing squishy.

Look, they could say: We're just being tough and discriminating.

Iraq is a dumb war, said Obama repeatedly. It's a [war of choice](#). Afghanistan is a [war of necessity](#), the central front in the war on terror. Having run on that, Obama had a need to at least make a show of trying to win the good war, the smart war.

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Streetwise Professor

Doing Marx One Better: Tragedy and Farce All At Once

by Craig Pirrong

Marx said that history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce. The Obama administration is attempting to one-up Marx and compress the process, with its simultaneously farcical and tragic policies on Iran and Syria.

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Zarif also met with President Vladimir Putin to reportedly discuss an unprecedented deal to barter Iranian oil for Russian goods. Informed sources in the Russian government have confirmed that Moscow is in the process of finalizing an agreement to buy half a million barrels of Iranian crude a day, while Iran will buy Russian goods in exchange. At present, Iran exports only a million barrels a day as a result of United States and European Union sanctions aimed to curtail its nuclear program. Western-imposed banking restrictions have also severely hampered Iran's ability to freely use its oil revenue. China is currently Iran's biggest oil buyer, taking in some 420,000 barrels of crude a day in exchange for other goods. If the oil deal with Russia goes ahead, Iran may extend its shrunken oil exports by 50 percent and collect some \$1.5

billion in extra revenue a month. This may undermine Western sanctions, which may have forced Iran to consider permanently constraining its nuclear program in the first place; while Russia may become Iran's main oil buyer

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That's probably true in legal terms, but note that was true yesterday, and last month, and last year. But Putin didn't do this. Until now. Because he sees that Obama is so desperate for a deal that he knows that he can get away with pretty much anything, and that Obama won't do or say a damned thing. (And no, State Department expressions of "concern" don't count.) So Putin and the Iranians are basically doing donuts on the White House lawn, with their windows down and their middle fingers up. And Obama just draws the drapes in the Oval Office.

Indeed, note that in some respects, this deal is against Russia's interests: the more Iranian oil on the market, the lower the price Russia gets for its exports. But either the geopolitical benefits make this worth it to Putin, or he and his cronies take a sufficient cut of the Iranian sales that he can accept the costs to Russia and the government's budget, or both.

Meanwhile, Iran says that even if it does enter a deal to suspend enrichment of uranium, it can reverse that decision "[in a day](#)." Asymmetries in commitment are always an impediment to a deal. Or they should be. Iran has made it clear that it can walk out on its commitments in a day. But what if the US and the Europeans suspend their sanctions? There is no way those can be re-instituted in months, or ever, let alone a day. So a deal doesn't lock in Iran to any commitments, but does lock in the US and Europe.

Only suckers enter into deals like that. Or those who are so intent on creating a legacy achievement that getting a deal is all that matters, even if it is a sham that will collapse in due course. (And looking back, at the way Obama gave the back of his hand to Iranian protesters in 2009, it is evident that he had his mind on this from day one: or perhaps more accurately, Valerie had her mind set on this.)

The fact that Russia is so willing to provide Iran with an escape from any sanctions also indicates that they have calculated that Obama has already capitulated. He will swallow anything—any insult, any concession—in order to get an ayatollah's signature on a piece of paper that the Iranian regime will disregard the instant it is in its interest to do so. Most smugglers try to hide their activities. Putin realizes he needn't bother. There are no consequences for flagrantly carrying on right in front of Obama's eyes.

And then there is Syria. [Today Kerry gave a droning statement \(but I repeat myself\) begging the opposition to attend Geneva II](#). He reiterated that Geneva II is intended to implement Geneva I. Which, if you even remember it, was adopted in June, 2012. 18+ months ago. During which time 100+ Syrians have died every day. Say 60,000 in round numbers. And they will continue to die, for an indeterminate time, because as Kerry is at pains to emphasize, Geneva II is just the *beginning* of a process. And the process requires agreement between Assad and the opposition. Which means never.

Recall that in September, Kerry compared Assad to Hitler. Now, he does not condemn him at all, except for “playing games” with relief convoys. Barrel bombs, torture, mass killings (as long as they aren’t with chemical weapons!) are totally fine. Just no game playing!

Like I said: a tragical farce. Or is it a farcical tragedy?

But of course the Iran-Russia story and the Syria story are connected. By making the deal on chemical weapons with Assad, we essentially became his partner. What’s more, since Iran, Russia, and Syria are tightly allied, Obama knows that doing anything that increases the odds of Assad’s downfall will scupper his overriding objective: a deal with Iran (no matter how fleeting and ineffectual that deal will be).

Translated: Sorry, Syrians. You have to die in your thousands, while the “process” of reconciling the irreconcilable drags on, and Obama sacrifices you—and the interests of the United States and its allies—to his narcissistic ambitions.

Syrians are paying a dreadful price for Obama’s narcissism every day. The entire region is paying a price, because the festering sore in Syria is the host to myriad jihadists who range from the bad (the Islamic Front) to the terrible (the Al Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front) to the utterly bestial (ISIS/ISIL). The US and its allies (notably Israel) haven’t paid the price yet, but Obama has sowed the wind, and we will reap the whirlwind in due course. An empowered, messianic Iran, with Russia providing money and cover, and convinced that the US is a paper tiger, is likely to take actions that will unleash a devastating sequence of events. It’s a matter of when, not if.

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Daily Beast

[Senior UK Defense Advisor: Obama Is Clueless About ‘What He Wants To Do In The World’](#)

by Nico Hines

Sir Hew Strachan, an expert on the history of war, says that the president’s strategic failures in Afghanistan and Syria have crippled America’s position in the world.

President Obama is “chronically incapable” of military strategy and falls far short of his predecessor George W. Bush, according to one of Britain’s most senior military advisors.

Sir Hew Strachan, an advisor to the Chief of the Defense Staff, told The Daily Beast that the United States and Britain were guilty of total strategic failure in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Obama’s attempts to intervene on behalf of the Syrian rebels “has left them in a far worse position than they were before.”

The extraordinary critique by a leading advisor to the United States' closest military ally comes days after Obama was [undermined by the former Defense Secretary Robert Gates](#), who questioned the President's foreign policy decisions and claimed he was deeply suspicious of the military.

Strachan, a current member of the Chief of the Defense Staff's Strategic Advisory Panel, cited the "crazy" handling of the Syrian crisis as the most egregious example of a fundamental collapse in military planning that began in the aftermath of 9/11. "If anything it's gone backwards instead of forwards, Obama seems to be almost chronically incapable of doing this. Bush may have had totally fanciful political objectives in terms of trying to fight a global War on Terror, which was inherently astrategic, but at least he had a clear sense of what he wanted to do in the world. Obama has no sense of what he wants to do in the world," he said.

The dithering over intervention against President Bashar al-Assad has empowered the Syrian ruler, undermined America's military reputation and destabilized the Middle East, said Strachan. "What he's done in talking about Red Lines in relation to Syria has actually devalued the deterrent effect of American military capability and it seems to me that creates an unstable situation, because if he were act it would surprise everybody," he said. "I think the other issue is that in starting and stopping with Assad, he's left those who might be his natural allies in Syria with nowhere to go. He's increased the likelihood that if there is a change of regime in Syria that it will be an Islamic fundamentalist one."

[Britain's shock parliamentary vote](#) against military action in Syria also exposed Prime Minister David Cameron's lack of a clear strategy. "It absolutely illustrated the failure to think through the strategic implications of his own actions," said Strachan.

Strachan's book *The Direction of War*, which will be published next month, examines the failure of modern political leaders to use strategy to predict and account for the implications of military action. Oxford University's Professor of the History of War says the lessons learned at the end of the 20th century proved to be damaging at the start of the next. "Using war did deliver. The wars were pretty short, the Falklands, First Gulf War, Kosovo, so people lulled themselves into an expectation that war was simply a continuation of policy and that it was successful. But it hasn't been since 9/11," he said.

Part of the problem, Strachan contends, is that politicians are unduly worried about allowing military leaders to give frank and open advice. He criticized the way General Stanley McChrystal was forced to resign after making unflattering remarks about his political bosses in Washington. "The concern about the military speaking out shows a lack of democratic and political maturity. We're not facing the danger of a military coup. The professional experts, who deal with war all the time, should be able to express their views all the time, openly and coherently, just as you would expect a doctor or a teacher to express their views coherently about how you run medical policy or teaching policy," he said.

Winston Churchill held daily strategy meetings with his chairman of the Chiefs of Staff during the Second World War, which encouraged an open exchange of views. "The Churchill-Allan Brooke relationship was fraught at times but it worked because both were pretty frank with each other," Strachan said. "Soldiers have a duty here as well—if they just say, 'yes Mr. Prime Minister or Mr. President, we can give you exactly what you want,' then they're probably not being very honest."

Fiscal Times

[We Finally Know Where the Buck Stops in Benghazi](#)

by Ed Morrissey

Normally, when Congress undertakes an investigation of the executive branch, the committee heading the probe will issue two versions of the findings – one for each party. Partisans on both sides use the political process of oversight to either defend their own or to make hay about their opponents, and astute observers can usually find truth by reading both and looking somewhere in between. Rare are those investigations within the normal committees on Capitol Hill that issue a bipartisan report – and one that condemns an administration for its incompetence.

That's not to say that [the Senate Intelligence Committee report](#) on the failures surrounding the attack on our consulate in Benghazi, resulting in the death of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other Americans, is entirely free from partisan arguments.

Democrats (as “the Majority” in the report) concluded that the attempt to claim that the attack was a demonstration over a YouTube video did not constitute a cover-up, but rather resulted from confusion in the intelligence community (IC) that didn't clarify the issue quickly enough to the administration. Likewise, Republicans included a shot at former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the only reference to her in the report, stating that “the final responsibility for security at diplomatic facilities lies with the former Secretary [of State].”

For the most part, though, the conclusions are both bipartisan and damning. The committee found that a string of terrorist attacks in Benghazi against Western targets, especially one three months before the final attack on the US facility itself, should have alerted State to the danger it faced. Furthermore, the committee questioned how State could have ignored its own security standards to approve the use of the building, a decision reapplied in July when [State renewed the lease](#) – just weeks after the previous attack.

These two issues – of the terrorist activity and the inexplicable waivers for proper security – drive most of the bipartisan condemnation of the report. The committee pointedly notes that the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) warned the Obama administration in June 2012 of the growing threat against Western interests in Benghazi in a report with a title that should have grabbed attention: “Libya: Terrorists Now Targeting U.S. and Western Interests.” It listed “recent attacks against the U.S. Mission compound in Benghazi, the growing ties between al Qaeda (AQ) regional nodes and Libya-based terrorists,” and said DIA “expect[ed] more anti-U.S. terrorist attacks in eastern Libya [redacted] due to the terrorists' greater presence there.”

The warnings didn't end there. The Pentagon admonished the next week that the failed-state environment would “increase Libyan terrorist capability in the permissive post-revolution security environment. Attacks will also increase in number and lethality as terrorists connect with AQ associates in Libya.” The CIA, whose facility also came under attack, issued a report three weeks later on July 6th titled “Libya: Al Qaeda Establishing Sanctuary.”

That month, State signed a lease on the Benghazi facility with a waiver on security requirements. Who signed that waiver? We still don't have an answer to that question – it's not answered in the bipartisan portion of the report – but Republicans raise the question in their response. “Although certain waivers of the standards could have been approved at a lower level, other departures, such as the co-location requirement, could only be approved by the

Secretary of State.” Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) raises a more direct accusation at Clinton aide Patrick Kennedy:

“Under Secretary of State for Management Patrick Kennedy testified before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in 2012 that the threat environment in Benghazi was “flashing red,” yet our investigation found that Under Secretary Kennedy, and other State Department officials, failed to ensure that a facility he personally approved in December 2011 had the necessary security to match the heightened threat environment.”

State doesn’t stand alone in the committee’s crosshairs, either. The CIA, which helped draft the initial talking points that led the Obama administration to insist for two weeks that the attack was a demonstration that got out of control, somehow forgot that they had warned over the summer about al Qaeda establishing sanctuary in eastern Libya with attacks predicted as a result, and asked to have the mention of the terrorist network removed. Both the FBI and CIA had reviewed the videotape of the compound and determined that there was no demonstration at all, but it took them six days to fix the assessment.

Far more consequential was the lack of coordination between CIA, State, and the Pentagon, however. The CIA did not formally share knowledge of the existence of their annex with the Department of Defense. The commander of US Africa Command, General Carter Ham, had no idea that there were more personnel to protect until the attack, leading the Republicans to muse: “We are puzzled as to how the military leadership expected to effectively respond and rescue Americans in the event of an emergency when it did not even know of the existence of one of the U.S. facilities.”

Not that it would have done much good anyway. [Fox’s James Rosen](#) reported earlier in the week that classified testimony to the House Armed Services Committee made it clear that the military considered this a planned terrorist attack within minutes. Defenders of the Obama administration pointed to additional testimony that debunked the claim that the military had received a “stand down order.”

That rumor turns out to be false – because the US military had [no assets in position to stage a rescue](#), according to General Ham, despite the escalating terrorist activity and the rather obvious approaching anniversary of the 9/11 attack. “No attack aircraft were placed on high alert on September 11th,” Fox reported. “Fighter jets were unarmed, and air refuelers were ten hours away in Great Britain.”

It’s as if the Pentagon, CIA, and State Department set out to ignore the red flags they themselves had been raising all year long. No one was prepared on the anniversary of 9/11 for an attack in the region where everyone knew al Qaeda to be “establishing sanctuary,” openly operating, and where the US predicted attacks would escalate.

The State Department in particular didn’t take action to bring its facility into compliance with its own security requirements, purposefully waiving them, in a city where terrorist attacks had already begun to escalate – including one on the facility itself – nor took action to get Americans out of harm’s way, despite the departure of other Western nations from Benghazi earlier in the year.

One does not need a name at the top of this report to know where responsibility rests for this massive failure. Hillary Clinton ran State, Leon Panetta ran Defense, and David Petraeus ran the CIA. But the distributed nature of the failure indicts the Obama administration and Barack Obama himself, too. The White House is responsible for interagency coordination, for one thing, especially when it comes to national security and diplomatic enterprises.

However, Obama's responsibility extends farther and more specifically, too. The reason that eastern Libya had transformed into a terrorist haven in the first place was because of the Obama-led NATO intervention that deposed Moammar Qaddafi without any effort to fill the security vacuum his abrupt departure created.

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Orange County Register **[Selfies replace focus on Big Picture](#)**

by Joel Kotkin

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Indeed, despite the incessant media obsession with technology as the driver of society, it seems we are a long way from the kind of dramatic change that, say, my parents' generation experienced. Born at the end of the horse-and-buggy age, they witnessed amazing changes – from the development of nuclear power and the jet engine to the first moon landing.

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One clear sign of our technological fail: the stagnant, or even declining, living standards for most Americans. New technology is not creating much-cheaper and better housing, nor is it reducing poverty or creating a new wave of opportunity for grass-roots businesses. In fact, the current “tech boom” has done little to improve incomes much outside a few stretches of the Bay Area, a handful of college towns, and overhyped city media districts.

Even Silicon Valley's proud tradition of truly ground-breaking innovation in engineering has slowed as the tech hub has become dominated by media and advertising-driven software companies. The prospect of the easy score in social media, [notes longtime entrepreneur Steven Blank](#), “marks the beginning of the end of the era of venture capital-backed big ideas in science and technology.”

Worse of all, the stagnating tech world is steadily reducing our own dreamscape. [Zohar Liebermensch](#), a student from my “history of the future” class at Chapman University, compared the initial visions of Disneyland's Tomorrowland with later concepts. Over each generation since the park opened in 1955, she found, designers had to ratchet down the more ambitious projections – such as a manned mission to Mars – as the prospects dropped for their actually occurring.

Disneyland, she noted, also cut back on refurbishment in the “Carousel of Progress” exhibit, focused on the future “typical” American family. In the early years of the park, updates were needed every three years. That became six years, then nine. The attraction now hasn't been significantly modified in 18 years. “This increased changeless period,” she notes, “waves another flag of concern, as it demonstrates Disney's view that there has been no noteworthy progress in almost two decades.”

Science fiction testifies most strongly about our technological underachievement. Stanley Kubrick's “2001: A Space Odyssey,” [notes author David Graeber](#), assumed that a 1968 movie audience would find it “perfectly natural” that, by 2001 – now, more than a decade ago – there would be regular commercial flights to the moon, advanced space stations and hyperadvanced computers with human personalities.

Essentially, our new tech doesn't offer anything like the revolutionary and broadly felt changes brought about by electricity, jet travel or, for that matter, indoor plumbing. Meanwhile, the major productivity enhancements spawned by the computer and Internet revolutions, [notes Northwestern University economist Robert J. Gordon](#), have already taken place, while the new social-media technology has done very little for productivity.

This trend has long-term implications for our society and economy. Increasingly, economists, such as Tyler Cowen, suggest that we are seeing a slowing of breakthroughs, with benefits increasingly accruing to a relative handful. We may hope to create a terrestrial “Star Trek” reality, but the society we *are* creating looks increasingly more like something out of the Middle Ages.

Can this decline in our dreamscape somehow be reversed? First, we need to look at the basic causes for our current narrow-casted view of technology. One is a relative lack of competition. In

the 1980s personal computer boom, there were scores of companies competing across a broad array of tech sectors, resulting in a few winners, but a rapid evolution of technology.

Today most of the large new niches – mobile software, Web search, social media – are dominated by a handful of companies. The model has shifted from fierce competition to what might be seen as a series of oligopolies dominated by a handful of sometimes shifting companies, largely controlled by a small but powerful group of investors and entrepreneurs. Job creation, even in the boom, has been [much slower than in previous booms](#) as tens of thousands of the people engaged in building the backbone of the information age – [telecom, semiconductor and computer product firms](#) – are being replaced by numbers of younger, cheaper and often foreign workers.

At the top of this system stands a remarkably small group whose [fortunes depend largely on using the Internet](#) as a vehicle for advertising, often based on gross invasion of privacy. “Tech is something like the new Wall Street,” [notes economist Umair Haque](#), “Mostly white, mostly dudes, getting rich by making stuff of limited social purpose and impact.”

Perhaps the biggest loss here may be psychological, the decline of what historian Frederick Jackson Turner called “the expansive character of American life.” Instead of exploring new frontiers, we now obsess over mobile apps, and our Big Picture has devolved into a procession of “selfies.” If anything, in most critical areas, such as housing and transport, we seem to be looking backward, to the days of small apartments, trolley cars or trains. A crowded, poorer future, not a tech nirvana, beckons.

If it's not prosperity for more people, what is the end game of the new tech model? Much of it is profoundly narcissistic, seeking to replace the physical world with a digital one and making most of humanity superfluous. Inventor Ray Kurzweil, now director of engineering at Google, advocates a path to “transhumanism,” with the ultimate aim of creating a kind of immortality by imprinting our brain patterns as software. This “transhumanist” vision also reflects an almost obsessive concern of the 65-year-old inventor, who takes about 150 vitamin supplements a day in hopes of delaying his own demise.

The potential class implications of Kurzweil's transhumanist agenda are particularly troubling. It is likely that much of the new biological technology for many years, perhaps for decades, will not be easily accessed except by the very rich. Those left behind, Kurzweil believes, will end up as what he dubbed MOSHs – Mostly Original Substrate Humans. “Humans who do not utilize such implants are unable to meaningfully participate in dialogues with those who do,” he writes.

Sun Microsystems co-founder Bill Joy suggests that the focus on human-machine interface will end up with “the elite” having greater control over the masses. And, because human work no longer will be necessary, most of us will become superfluous, a useless burden on the system. “If the elite consists of softhearted liberals,” he suggests, they may play the role of “good shepherds to the rest of the human race.” But, under any circumstances, he predicts, the mass of humanity “will have been reduced to the status of domestic animals.”

Clearly, as a society, we need to start thinking about how technology can serve broader human purposes. This is not an impingement on private enterprise: The Internet, and the microprocessor, were developed largely at taxpayer expense, notably through the Defense Department and NASA. Digital technology should be spurring the creation of new competitive

companies, not, as we see now, fostering an American version of the Japanese cartels called *keiretsu*, [where firms like Amazon, Google, Apple and Microsoft use their unfathomable riches to dominate a host of fields, from robotics and space travel to health care, even publishing.](#)

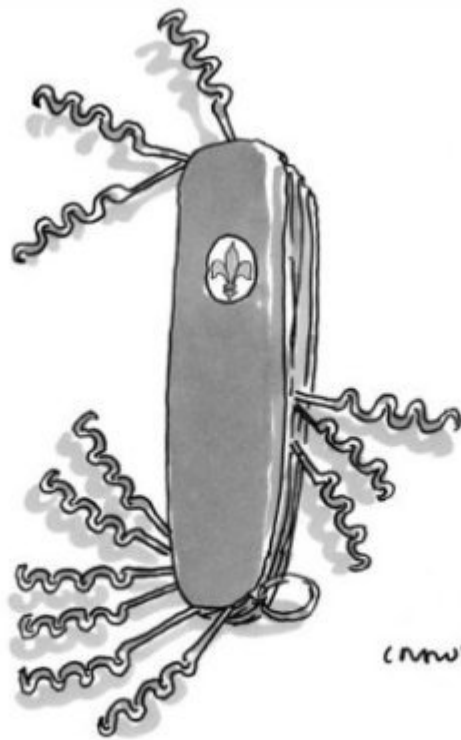
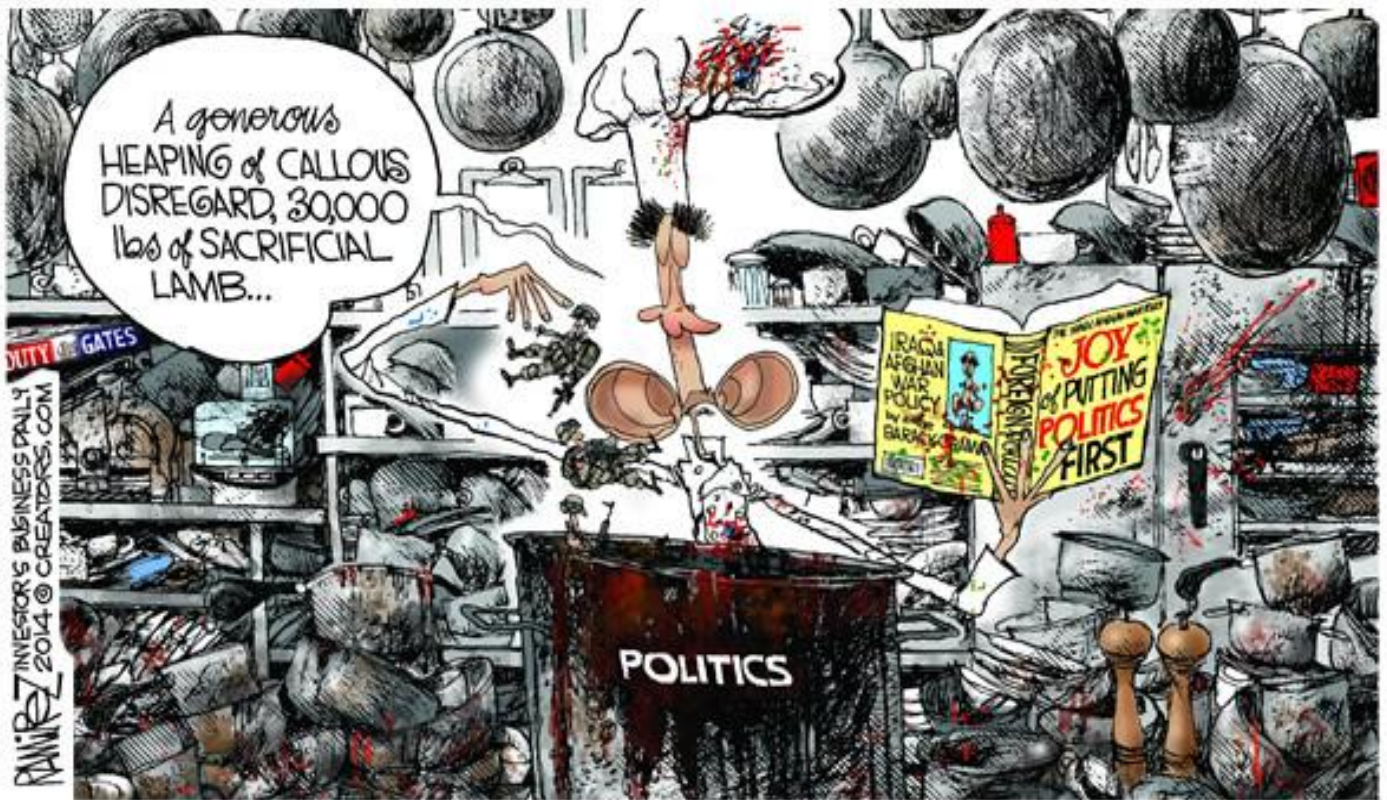
Instead of allowing [technology to promote oligopoly](#), we need to spark competition to speed up innovation that could benefit the majority of people, as opposed to creating a class of fabulously rich superhumans. We also need again to expand our physical frontiers – both in space and, with intelligence, on Earth – so more people can live comfortably, with privacy and maximum freedom of action. Let's make Tomorrowland again a place we would like to have our children inhabit.

Joel Kotkin is R.C. Hobbs Professor of Urban Studies at Chapman University. He is the executive editor of www.newgeography.com.



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CRAWFORD

FRENCH ARMY KNIFE

What Liberals think Conservatives eat for breakfast.



Wrong, of course, because...

1. The coffee is not black

2. The gun should be angled out for quicker grasp.

3. Only wusses eat eggs sunny side up.

4. Not nearly enough bacon.