New American

Written by **C. Mitchell Shaw** on March 12, 2019

Surveillance State Uses Modern Tech; Most Government Systems Are Antiquated

In the 21st century, computer technology is an indispensable part of nearly everything we do. It not only makes it possible to do in seconds or minutes tasks which would have taken days, weeks, or months; it also makes it possible to perform tasks which would simply be impossible without computers. And yet, in this — as in most everything else — government is running woefully behind the private sector. In fact, government — at the federal, state, and in some instances local levels — is *decades* behind.

In an article in April 2016, *The New American* reported that many colleges are failing to to prepare students for life in the digital age. The lack of education on basic things such as best practices to stay safe and protect data online is simply without excuse. But at least most colleges are using current hardware running current operating systems and other software. Government agencies, on the other hand, are still using hardware and software from the 1960's, '70s, and '80s.

Take the tech capitol of the world — San Francisco — for instance. The Bay Area is populated by some very big hitters in the tech world, including Cisco, Zendesk, Yahoo, Intuit, Dolby, Dropbox, Square, Linkedin, Adobe, Google, Twitter, Disqus, Whisper Systems, and others. There are also smaller companies, such as Purism and System76 (both of which focus on Linux-based computers) in the area. While not all of those companies are based in or around San Francisco, they all have major operations there.

It would be reasonable to expect that the tech Mecca would have government agencies using modern computers. Reasonable, but wrong. Bloomberg recently reported:

> The only place in San Francisco still pricing real estate like it's the 1980s is the city assessor's office. Its property tax system dates back to the dawn of the floppy disk. City employees appraising the market work with software that runs on a dead programming language and can't be used with a mouse. Assessors are prone to make mistakes when using the vintage software because it can't display all the basic information for a given property on one screen. The staffers have to open and exit several menus to input stuff as simple as addresses. To put it mildly, the setup "doesn't reflect business needs now," says the city's assessor, Carmen Chu.

San Francisco is not alone, either. The computer system used by the Baltimore Police Department for storing and tracking crime reports is more than 20 years old, doesn't comply with the national incident reporting system, and can't link to other databases. The traffic control systems for most of Philadelphia's 3,000 traffic signals are from the 1960's. And in New Jersey, the nation's second-largest commuter rail system uses (believe it or not) paper forms for equipment and supplies procurement. The list goes on and on.

And while cities and states struggle to prop up these antiquated systems, the federal government — with a bloated budget of roughly four trillion dollars and requiring a degree in several fields to even begin to understand — is even worse. In 2016, it was reported by ZDNet, PCWorld, and others that the federal government was spending nearly 80 percent of its $80 billion IT budget holding ancient tech together. $61 billion apparently buys a lot of baling wire and duct tape.

As ZDNet reported in 2016:

> A system used by the Justice Dept. to monitor security and custody levels and inmate population information still uses COBOL, a programming language that dates back to the post-World War era. A system that tracks incidents involving hazardous materials used by the Transport Dept. is more than four decades old. A number of servers at Homeland Security still run Windows Server 2003, which hasn't been supported for almost a year, but these servers won't be transitioned to federal systems until 2018 because of backwards-compatibility issues.

> And, a nuclear weapons coordination system used by the Defense Dept. is still running on an IBM Series/1 computer — a machine that dates back to the 1970s and uses 8-inch floppy disks.

And PCWorld reported, also in 2016:

> Some U.S. government agencies are using IT systems running Windows 3.1, the decades-old COBOL and Fortran programming languages, or computers from the 1970s.

> A backup nuclear control messaging system at the U.S. Department of Defense runs on an IBM Series 1 computer, first introduced in 1976, and uses eight-inch floppy disks, while the Internal Revenue Service's master file of taxpayer data is written in assembly language code that's more than five decades old, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office.

> Some agencies are still running Windows 3.1, first released in 1992, as well as the newer but unsupported Windows XP, Representative Jason Chaffetz, a Utah Republican, noted during a Wednesday hearing on outdated government IT systems.

But those reports are nearly three years old. Surely — in the wake of the GAO report and all the cries for improvement — things have gotten better. Not really. In some cases, a little has been done; in others, nothing. Except that the apologists have rolled out excuses. In a March 12, 2018 article entitled "Why Does the Federal Government Have So Many Old Computer Systems?" the American Society for Public Administration admitted that "The Government Accountability Office (GAO) and others have written about the need to modernize the federal government's legacy IT (information technology) systems." Including a link, the article conceded that "Some are over 50 years old," before going on to "explain" why this is not a big deal.

The writer stated, "Because of funding limitations, I believe retention of these old systems is a perfectly rational response to the situation federal agencies find themselves in." Using an illustration from his experience as the "liaison for several legacy systems" for a government agency, the writer went on to

state, "Such systems are critical to agency operations and I believe are a major reason the federal government has been able to maintain level employment of about two million employees over many decades." The article goes on to assert:

> The older legacy systems are not still around today because of an organization's "culture" as some have suggested. They are not around because of incompetence or neglect. The main reason for retention of these old systems is the high cost of replacing them.

This writer will perhaps need to be pardoned for thinking that sounds a bit too much like excusing someone for cutting corners on essentials after blowing their budget on things they don't need. But that is exactly what this is. For instance, that same federal government has spent obscene amounts of your money and mine — and incurred ridiculous amounts of debt that you and I (and our children's children) are on the hook to repay building the surveillance state. In a show of irony that would impress even Alanis Morissette, that surveillance state operates on state-of-the-art hardware and software. Perhaps, the FedGov could take a portion of the money it currently spends prying into the privacy of the more than 300,000,000 people who call America home and spend it replacing those systems that are essential to its constitutionally mandated functions. And to put in the for-what-it's-worth column, the surveillance state agencies (NSA, CIA, etc.) each have their own budgets for building and maintaining the apparatus used to spy on American citizens' phone calls, texts, e-mails, browsing histories, etc.

As to what little *has* been done to fix the problem of the federal government relying on decrepit tech to do its legitimate job, the American Society for Public Administration article points to the Modernizing Government Technology (MGT) Act signed into law by President Trump on December 12, 2017. The MGT Act set aside $500 million over a two-year period to be used to bring those old systems up to par. To put that in perspective, that $500 million represents a mere .065 percent of the FedGov's IT budget. In other words, it is less than two-thirds of one percent. Rounding down, it amounts to nothing. In reality, it amounts to nothing. As to fixing the problem of an out-of-control government spending money like a petulant teenager with dad's credit card while ignoring the essentials, it amounts to nothing.

Keep that in mind the next time the federal government wants to meddle in the affairs of a free-market Internet. Because when it comes to tech, the FedGov is content to do its constitutionally-mandated job on the equivalent of an Etch-a-Sketch while spending us all into poverty in areas where it has no business being.

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