

A Jeffersonian Technocracy

By Michael Cecire • Feb 17th, 2009 • Category: Economy

In the February 8th Sunday New York Times Magazine, David Leonhardt reminds us how **central growth is to our country's persistent well-being**. In the midst of a recession, the fragilities of the American economy have been exposed as the finance-driven growth of the past 20 years has been shown to have had no clothes. There are problems with Leonhardt's analysis – his wide-eyed subscription to the effects of the Keynesian multiplier not least of them – but he is absolutely correct in channeling the late Mancur Olson's compelling case linking the sedimentation of political interests and big government with economic cum global decline. Leonhardt's further observation that our country needs new innovation clusters to return to high growth is quite timely, but his questionable prescription for state-led investment seems to miss his own point.

Nonetheless, there's no mistaking the fact that our country can no longer depend on the creative wizardry of Wall Street to lead American growth and in its absence, no other industry seems to be well-poised to fill the vacuum. This includes the ever-ambiguous 'green jobs,' which, even if their promise is really delivered, will only serve to supplant the existing energy industry. As the full realities of the recession come into focus, it isn't hard to feel discouraged about the prospects for American leadership through the thick of the century.

But, to paraphrase every school counselor since the Roman lyceums, this may be a good opportunity to turn the lemon of our economy into the lemonade of innovative, strong future economic growth. While the Californias and New Jerseys scramble to scrape the bottom of the barrel for every dollar to keep their bloated bureaucracies insulated from their own regulatory free-for-all, Virginia may be in the enviable position to not only weather the storm relatively unscathed, but to turn our attentions toward assembling the heart of America's new century growth. Virginia has many comparative advantages, geographically, demographically and in policymaking, but to resolve to drive the economy, these advantages must be organized as a structural framework upon which to incubate a new industrial revolution.

As noted by Glenn Reynolds, a University of Tennessee law professor and the brains behind the magnificent weblog **Instapundit**, the power conferred by the internet to the masses have been nothing short of remarkable. In his must-read book, *An Army of Davids*, Reynolds implies an economy of entrepreneurs, shaped by the liberating allowances of the internet and the broad leaps in technology. Not necessarily a population of small business owners (although that wouldn't be bad either), but a transfer of dominance from the power centers of the office parks and bureaucratic monoliths to the individual. His book is populated with rich examples of this phenomenon already occurring, but it's still a long way from disaggregating the rarefied citadels of commerce and government.

In synch with Rahm Emmanuel's exhortation to let "no crisis go to waste," the moment is ripe for Virginia to plant the seeds of an economic culture that could boost efficiency, cut costs,

empower individual ingenuity and cultivate a lasting growth that will be more environmentally-friendly and utterly unique to boot.

If the onset of industrialization in the 19th century and the suburban-frenzy of the 20th century were a collective wrecking ball to Thomas Jefferson's dream of a decentralized, self-reliant republic, the diffusive energy of the internet makes a 'Jeffersonian Technocracy' not only possible, but economically desirable.

What would this look like? Rather than packing millions of people on the interstate corridors from DC to Richmond to Hampton Roads, people would be free to disperse in clusters around the state, paradoxically encouraging greater density and maximizing quality of life for millions. Paired with smart land-use reform – Andres Duany's Transects come to mind – the grey blur of Virginia's east coast would start to green and the efficacy of intercity train-borne freight and passenger service would skyrocket. People looking for affordable housing wouldn't have to break the bank on the peripheries of the major cities, but would be provided the option of turning to the Lynchburgs and Front Royals, Bluefields and Emporias.

So far, so good, but how can it be realized? The transformation to the Jeffersonian Technocracy would not be the fruits of an exercise in central planning, but would conform to a demand created by policy measures that would: 1) reshape the nature of the state government; 2) create incentives for industry; and 3) finally pursue much-needed land reform measures that encourage human-scale density and discourage suburban sprawl. To the first point, the Commonwealth should take the lead in accelerating telecommute options throughout government, dismissing archaic preferences for often-unnecessary proximity considerations and radically pare away underperforming or inefficient bureaucracies. Meanwhile, a slate of incentives that reward similar measures by Virginia businesses and organizations would open the door for more creativity in workforce alignment while channeling investment into promising clusters around the state. Finally, land-use reform would acclimatize prevailing settlement patterns to the contours of this new economic culture and plan for growth.

At the end of it, a dispersed investment economy that elevates the ingenuity of the individual would inevitably lend itself to a more entrepreneurial society, inducing risk taking and naturally distributing capital across the Commonwealth. At the same time, Virginians' relationship with the internet would change irrevocably as it becomes a fixture of daily life in a way unseen anywhere else in the world, inherently facilitating a tech-savvy population and economic opportunities all its own. Virginia could parlay its newly-found comparative advantage into global technology leadership, driving more investment, entrepreneurial innovations and more economic growth. The advantages of a technologically-advanced Commonwealth would compel a presence from some of the most exciting, cutting-edge industries in the world, creating ever-greater conditions for growth and the emergence of the 'next big thing.' Leonhardt's quirky faith in the Keynesian multiplier may be quixotic, but a wired, entrepreneurially empowered Virginia is truly an economic multiplier we can believe in.





Michael Cecire is an economic development practitioner living in the Philadelphia area and working with a New Jersey public investment agency. A former Peace Corps Volunteer, Cecire earned his Bachelor of Science in Anthropology from Virginia Commonwealth University and is currently pursuing graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published articles with the London Telegraph, MichaelTotten.com, and TCS Daily.

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4 Responses »

1. **John Vivadelli** on **February 17th, 2009 at 2:25 pm**:

Hello Michael,

I'm a long time friend of Jim Bacon's and walk stride for stride with him in his views of transportation, land use, city planning, and the very nature of how people "go to work". I also know Andres Duany and have observed a charette he ran in a town outside of Atlanta.

Did you know that 50-70% of all commercial office space is vacant on any given day due to technology enabled mobility? I have been plowing this field for over 15 years to help organizations make their facilities as flexible and agile as their employees have become. The value of doing this is measured in \$ tens of millions saved, billions of BTU's saved and thousands of metric tons of carbon avoided.

I would enjoy a discussion with you when you have the time.

Regards,
John

2. **Fred Costello** on **February 17th, 2009 at 3:11 pm**:

Telecommuting requires honesty and measurable performance. Honesty is sorely lacking these days. Measurable performance is difficult in almost all areas except retail. It is most difficult in projects requiring teamwork. Subcontracting with entrepreneurs offers the best hope for a distributed workforce.

3. **Instapundit » Blog Archive » BUILDING A Jeffersonian Technocracy?...** on **February 17th, 2009 at 9:24 pm**:

[...] BUILDING A Jeffersonian Technocracy? [...]

4. **Robert B Moler** on **March 10th, 2009 at 7:32 pm**:

3/28/2009

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Speculation is a wonder avocation. Maybe everything you wrote would come to be, but it is speculation. There is no objective evidence that any of it would transpire as you describe it. Jefferson (who I admire excessively) was engaging in speculative wishful thinking. The last time Europe enjoyed(?) a system similar to the one you describe was in the middle ages when cities were mostly depopulated, hamlets and tiny villages were per force self sustaining - there being little or no trade - and virtually everything was owned by the local autocrat. Governments got instituted or at least started to put some pressure on the owners of everything to give the 99% of the people who owned little or nothing a slightly larger share of the pie. In today's system, will the comparable people simple give up their control of the means of production (and the politicians that they have bought or seduced?)”

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