

*Books*

**Innovative State: How New Technologies Can  
Transform Government**

By Aneesh Chopra

Review by Sonal Shah

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Summer 2014

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# BOOKS

REVIEWS OF NEW AND NOTABLE TITLES

## Government by Toolkit

REVIEW BY SONAL SHAH

**T**he Obama administration ushered into the US federal government a renewed emphasis on innovation. Starting in 2008, I was lucky enough to be a part of that process. I served on the new president's transition team and oversaw the Technology, Innovation, and Government Reform working group. We made two significant recommendations. One was to create an Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, which I would later lead. The other was to create a new White House position: chief technology officer (CTO) of the United States. The first person to serve in that role was Aneesh Chopra, author of the new book *Innovative State*.

In the book, Chopra starts by offering a brief but compelling history of government-enabled technological innovation in the United States. In 1843, for example, Congress appropriated seed money to Samuel F.B. Morse so that he could build an experimental telegraph line. Similarly, the US Army pioneered the use of mechanization and interchangeable parts. Chopra notes that the army's "arsenal system," as it was called, helped "to revolutionize old industries like sewing and create new ones like bicycle and automobile manufacturing."

Chopra then presents an overview of later efforts within the federal government to keep up with technological change. He highlights in particular the work of Jim Pinkerton, deputy director for domestic policy in the White House under President George H.W. Bush, and Elaine Kamarck, a senior advisor in the Clinton administration. Pinkerton promoted a so-called "new paradigm," which Chopra summarizes as follows: "The problem was not only that government had grown overweight; it had become antiquated in a rapidly changing world." Kamarck, working with Vice President Al Gore, helped lead the Reinventing Government initiative, an effort that was



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Aneesh Chopra  
299 pages, Atlantic Monthly Press

guided by four principles: Cut red tape. Put customers first. Empower employees. Get back to basics.

As the first CTO of the United States, Chopra built on that earlier work. From President Obama, moreover, he received a mandate to invest broadly in four areas: research and development, human capital, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math), and broadband access. In the book, he discusses his work on those issues. But he focuses mainly on laying out his vision for a more "innovative state." Here, he draws on a memo that he wrote for the president in 2012, after announcing that he would soon leave the administration. In the memo, he outlined what he called an Open Innovator's Toolkit—a set of four tools that policymakers can deploy at any level of government, anywhere in the world.

- *Open data* relates to "enabling the public to access more of the information that is stored in file cabinets throughout the government."
- *Impatient convening* has to do with "inviting the private sector to work collaboratively on standards that lower barriers to entry and increase competition" in pivotal industries.

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- *Challenges and prizes* are a matter of "casting a much wider net to solve a particular problem" and a way to "[pay] for results rather than flashy proposals."
- *Attracting talent* involves "recruiting entrepreneurs into the government" and pairing them "with similarly skilled public officials in a startup setting."

In chapters that cover each of these tools, Chopra cites experiences and ideas that emerged from his time in the Obama administration. In his discussion of open data, he points to Todd Park, who served as CTO of the US Department of Health and Human Services and who became CTO of the United States after Chopra left that post. Park realized that the potential of open data lay not just in releasing raw information, but also in engaging outside innovators. Chopra, quoting Park, writes: "The trick was not in dictating the next step, but in allowing 'everyone else in the universe to actually tap into the data to build all kinds of tools and services and applications and features that we couldn't even dream up ourselves, let alone execute and grow to scale.'"

Chopra offers great examples of bringing new kinds of talent into government. The Executive in Residence (EIR) program at the US Food and Drug Administration, he explains, connected "external and internal talent, and asked them to apply lean startup principles to a clearly-defined mission." One achievement of EIR was an improved regulatory process that led to faster approval of proposed medical devices. In another initiative, Park helped set up the Presidential Innovation Fellows program, which gathers people from multiple agencies to work on ambitious projects. One such project was RFP EZ—an effort to update the contracting process. The first request for proposals under the new process attracted 270 companies that had never before competed for federal contracts.

Chopra provides useful insight about using the toolkit that he describes. Yet his focus on tools leads him to avoid a broader discussion about creating social impact. Achieving social change requires more than tools. It

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requires innovation not just at the level of “what,” but also at the level of “how.” It requires us to redesign the entire government operating system—by changing mandatory funding to invest in programs that work, for example, or by creating partnerships that will outlast any one administration.

In *Innovative State*, there is little acknowledgment of the civic organizations and nonprofit groups that account for about 11 percent of the US workforce. There is also little discussion of cross-disciplinary approaches, new types of multi-sector partnerships, or the need to invest in training talent and building capacity within the government itself. (Chopra seems to assume that new talent can come only from the corporate sector.) The problems that government confronts are multi-dimensional, and the solutions must be multi-dimensional as well. ■

## The Trouble With Top-Down

REVIEW BY KEVIN STARR

**I** wanted to love *Tyranny Of Experts*, the new book by William Easterly. I’ve admired his work for years. I love the provocative title, and how could you not fall for the subtitle, “Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor”?

And the fundamental thesis of the book is such an important one: Authoritarian, technocratic, one-size-fits-all development is bad, and the individual rights of the ostensible beneficiaries of development should be paramount. People know what’s best for them, and even proven and effective development interventions will fail to have lasting effects in the context of oppressive governments. The best stuff bubbles up from below, when markets and technology are allowed to amplify the ideas of people who are given voices and choices.

The problem is that however pressing and true this message may be, there have

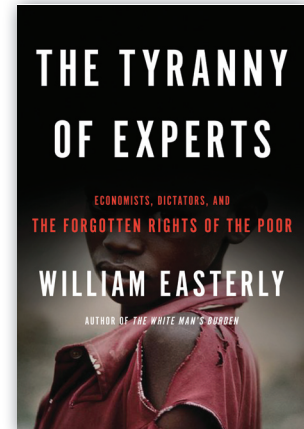
been many cogent critiques of witless top-down policy, and there isn’t a lot that’s particularly fresh or contemporary in *The Tyranny Of Experts*.

The book opens strongly enough, with the story of Ohio farmers thrown off their land at gunpoint as the result of a project financed and promoted by the World Bank. The details are awful: kids trapped in fires set by soldiers, cows felled by machine guns, harvests doused with gasoline. It’s upsetting, but it’s also implausible, and when Easterly reveals that it’s really an account of an incident that took place in Uganda in 2010, the effect is jolting. I thought to myself: *Man, we are in for a ride.*

Next thing I know, we’re in the middle of an imaginary debate between two Nobel economists: Friedrich Hayek and Gunnar Myrdal. In Easterly’s telling, Hayek and Myrdal represent the advocates of bottom-up and top-down development, respectively, and an exploration of their diametrically opposed approaches is a central part of the book. Hayek’s view, as Easterly paraphrases it, is that “individual rights were both an end in themselves and a means by which free individuals in a free society solved many of their own problems.” Myrdal, by contrast, comes across as a pointy-headed jerk who believes in the wisdom of centralized authorities. Sometimes it may be necessary to impose, say, better agricultural policies from on high—even if (and here Easterly is quoting Myrdal directly) “it require[s] the killing of many half-starved cows.”

Whether Easterly’s rendition of these guys’ views is accurate, I’ll leave for others to decide. I’m more concerned with what’s happening in international development in 2014. I’d hoped that Easterly would proceed to deliver a full-on critique of the current state of affairs, replete with juicy material about nitwit technocrats and some great gossip about the stupidity of Big Aid organizations.

Instead, I found myself mired in discussions of Sun Yat-sen, Adam Smith, and the technology of 15th-century Italy. Eventually, I got so desperate to read about something immediately relevant that I started fishing around in the index to see if I’d missed



**THE TYRANNY OF EXPERTS:**  
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Forgotten Rights of the Poor

William Easterly  
377 pages, Basic Books

something. I hadn’t. Here’s an example: The blurb copy on the book jacket singles out the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as a bad actor. The book’s concluding chapter refers to that foundation’s “disrespect for poor people.” In between, there’s very little to support that position. I looked up every single reference to the Gates Foundation: The first mention is on page 123, where Easterly tells us that the foundation had the temerity to praise the (admittedly nasty) Mengistu government in Ethiopia for its efforts to reduce child mortality. That’s it! Pages 153, 156, 158, 165, and 197 simply offer brief variations on that same theme.

We could all gain from a thoughtful critique of Big Philanthropy and Big Aid. But there’s little in the way of specific criticism of current development efforts here: There’s the unfortunate complicity of aid donors in the depredations of the Ethiopian government, there’s a single unconscionable World Bank project in Uganda, and that’s all—two examples in the whole book. Where are these experts who are tyrannizing the poor now?

It strikes me that a relentless focus on real impact in the lives of the poor would cut through the whole Gordian knot of development: Real change requires that we address both the bottom-up and the top-down, that we design our efforts with beneficiaries front and center, and that we use evidence of real impact in the lives of the poor as the indicator of whether we’re doing it right. Easterly makes clear that his book is “not about what we can do to end poverty,”