

# From The Hill to The Valley

—by Jose Antonio Vargas

Here in Silicon Valley, David Kralik, a Washington fan for ten years, is, let's face it, a strange import. He is here to learn how to take government into the twenty-first century.

Kralik is a probe of sorts, a vanguard of a small but growing Washington consensus that the federal government—not just its elected officials but also its middle bureaucrats—can learn from Silicon Valley's ethos. Its creative, entrepreneurial drive. Its consumer-driven, my-product-is-better-than-your-product spirit. Its technological know-how.

Once a House page when Gingrich was speaker, Kralik is now director of Internet strategy for Gingrich's new "tripartisan" non-profit, American Solutions for Winning the Future. The group aims to move beyond partisanship and tackle issues—government accountability, education—with the help of the Internet.

Kralik describes himself as a bridge between "a world that works: the Valley" and "a world that doesn't: Washington." The political gridlock. The circular bureaucracies.

Technology is irrepressibly changing politics. The 2008 presidential campaign has buried any doubt about that. Its impact, Kralik knows, goes beyond whichever party wins the White House and Congress in November. It will continually affect how people interact with their government, what they expect from their officials, and when.

A cross between political junkie and tech geek, he's the kind of guy who sends an e-mail at 2 a.m. and follows up at 8. Talks so fast he swallows his consonants. And



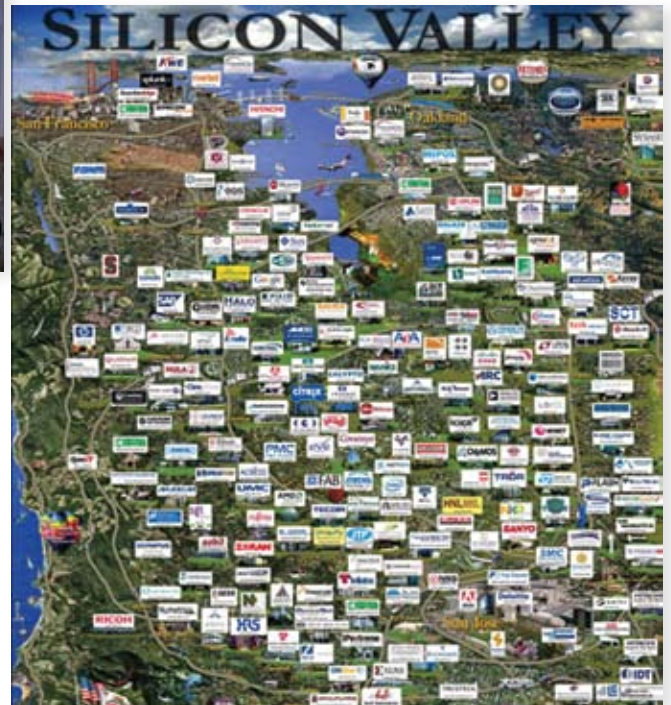
text-messages while driving. A guy who remembers his very first computer ("a Tandy 1000, with a monochrome green screen"). Who lives it up on fantasy role-playing video games. A guy who earned a 113-year-old organization an unlikely distinction when, while vacationing in Australia over the New Year's holiday in 2005, he wrote the first blog post of the new year.

Though he's not a Washington expert by any means, "it doesn't take a PhD to figure out that the federal government has failed us," he says.

"I've spent time in the Valley since leaving Congress, and two things have become clearer and clearer. One, the Valley operates in the technology of the 21st century. That's the Web. And two, if we are going to compete with India and China, we need to look a lot more like Palo Alto and less like Detroit. We're due for a transformation."

For years, Washington and the Valley have operated in silos. They didn't get each other. They didn't want to get each other.

Washington is top-down, centralized, "a series of fiefdoms," Kralik says. Silicon Valley is a bottom-up,



Global view of Silicon Valley derived from high-altitude satellite images.

"somewhat chaotic," decentralized network that thrives "on meritocracy," he continues. But in reality, the two worlds can't operate separately.

In response to a spate of lawsuits against tech firms in the mid-1990s, Valley CEOs formed TechNet, a bipartisan network that lobbies in Washington. And by the time the Microsoft antitrust case made headlines in the late '90s, it was clear that the Valley needed to beef up its presence in Washington.

Says Peter Leyden, the former editor of *Wired* magazine who heads the New Politics Institute, a think tank focusing on technology's impact on Washington: "There's an emerging sense that both worlds need each other. Think of it this way: The scale of the problems that the world faces—globalization, global warming, global terrorism—can't be solved without these two hubs cooperating with each other."



Kralik knows all of this full well. On a recent six-hour flight from Washington to the Valley, he drafted a three-column chart. “The world that works.” “The world that fails.” “Making government from a world that fails to a world that works.”

Kralik puts the U.S. Census Bureau in the world-that-fails column. After spending more than \$150 million on handheld computers to count everyone in the country, the Census Bureau announced a few weeks ago that it will scrap that program and hire 600,000 temporary workers and go back to the same way that it’s counted people since 1790: with paper and pen.

“Mindboggling,” says a flabbergasted Kralik. “Why can’t we get together the brightest minds at Google, at Apple, at whatever companies here in the Valley, and figure out a more high-tech way of counting our citizens?”

Silicon Valley is Kralik’s university. Armed with his laptop, he drives his black Saturn SUV up and down Highway 101, the region’s main artery, meeting top employees at some of the Valley’s leading high-tech firms.

He runs scenarios in his head, potential solutions for this-or-that problem, which typically end up in a what-if formulation.

Take a recent afternoon meeting at Yelp.com. Yelp is an online soapbox for anyone who wants to review and rate their local gyms, restaurants and shops—your local anything. Jeremy Stoppelman came up with the idea for Yelp when he was sick with the flu four years ago.

The concept, Kralik thinks, could be applied to government. While Stoppelman talks about the Yelp community that’s blossomed in Washington—“The activity is really picking up there”—Kralik interrupts, wondering out loud, “What if we could Yelp our government, you know, review and rate how government, how a particular agency or department, is doing its work?”

Another day, another Silicon Valley company. This time, he’s on a video conference call with Bobbi Kurshan of Curriki. It’s a play on the words “curriculum” and “wiki,” and Kralik cultivates the seed of an idea: Can it be used in federal education policy?

Curriki operates under the wiki-fication of knowledge: an open-source site in which teachers and educators can collaborate in building curricula for K-12 students. After listening to Kurshan further describe Curriki’s goals—“We want teachers across the country to share what they’re learning”—Kralik has another brainstorm: “What if the Department of Education adapted Curriki?”

Kurshan, carefully couching her words, replies: “They have other priorities when it comes to technology, and content is not one of them.” That’s the hurdle.

“This whole red versus blue, Republicans versus Democrats, us-versus-them thing hasn’t done us any good or solved any problems,” Kralik says, walking down Fourth Street in downtown San Francisco after the conference call.

“Customers walk away from businesses if they’re not happy. But we’re not customers; we’re citizens. If we’re unhappy, where else are we gonna go? Cuba?” No, to our government which would be well advised to modernize the way it does the people’s business.

*[The full article appeared in The Washington Post, June 3, 2008].  
mobilesurveyresearch.wordpress.com is the source of the Harris handheld image on this page.]*

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