

White House Tech Advisor Focuses on Innovation

By **Tam Harbert** | November 11, 2018, 11:35 PM | *Techonomy Exclusive*

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Michael Kratsios (Paul Sakuma)

President Trump’s top tech advisor, Michael Kratsios, told a room full of tech and business leaders at Techonomy 2018 that the Trump administration’s main goal is to stimulate innovation while removing governmental barriers to innovation.

His overture was met with polite skepticism.

Kratsios, deputy U.S. chief technology officer and deputy assistant to the president in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) said that encouraging innovation is one part of a three-part approach.

“What makes the U.S. so unique is the truly vibrant research ecosystem,” he said, citing government investment, academia and the free market as the three ingredients. “What I ask is, ‘what can we do on the federal level to supercharge our contribution to that system?’.”

The second part is empowering Americans to innovate by providing citizens with the tools they need to succeed in the 21st century, including ensuring widespread internet connectivity and promoting STEM education.

Some 34 million Americans, most in rural areas, don’t have access to high-speed internet, he noted. Under the president’s policies, the Department of Education has committed \$200 million to STEM education.

The third part is defending American technology abroad.

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“We have foreign adversaries that don’t respect the rules, who blatantly and flagrantly disrespect our companies and steal our IP,” he said. “That’s something we cannot stand for.”

But some questioned how the administration squares its goals of encouraging innovation with its stance on immigration and trade. “Immigration policy and tariffs are sort of at odds with that,” said Josh Kampel, CEO of Techonomy.

More forceful was a comment by Rodney Brooks, founder of two robotics companies — iRobot (maker of the Roomba) in 1990, and Rethink Robotics (maker of industrial robots) in 2008. Rethink Robotics closed its doors in October.

“Six weeks ago, the U.S. had one company that built industrial robots — only one. It now has zero,” said Brooks.

Among the causes of his company’s failure was the blowback from Trump’s tariffs, namely a 25-percent retaliatory tariff from China, said Brooks. Meanwhile, many of the company’s potential investors abandoned it out of fear of the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS), he said.

Brooks said that entrepreneurs are now planning to base companies in Canada, so that they can take investment from anywhere in the world and so their talented multinational employees don’t run into immigration problems as they have in the United States.

“It doesn’t really matter what you are doing in the White House to get rid of barriers when these much more systemic barriers are making innovators flee from the U.S.,” Brooks said to audience applause.

Kratsios responded that the administration wants “the best and the brightest, and they should have a legal pathway to come to the [United States].” As for foreign investment, he pointed to several documented examples in which Chinese investment has led to the theft of U.S. companies’ IP.

“For the first time in a very long time, we have an administration that actually takes this issue very seriously and has the back of innovators and entrepreneurs who deserve to have their inventions and their research protected.”

Kratsios pointed specifically to the innovation of the 17 federal national laboratories, DARPA, IARPA and the NSF. “We want to try to build connections between all the pockets of innovation in the federal government with the private sector and the academics,” he said.

Watch the conversation:



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