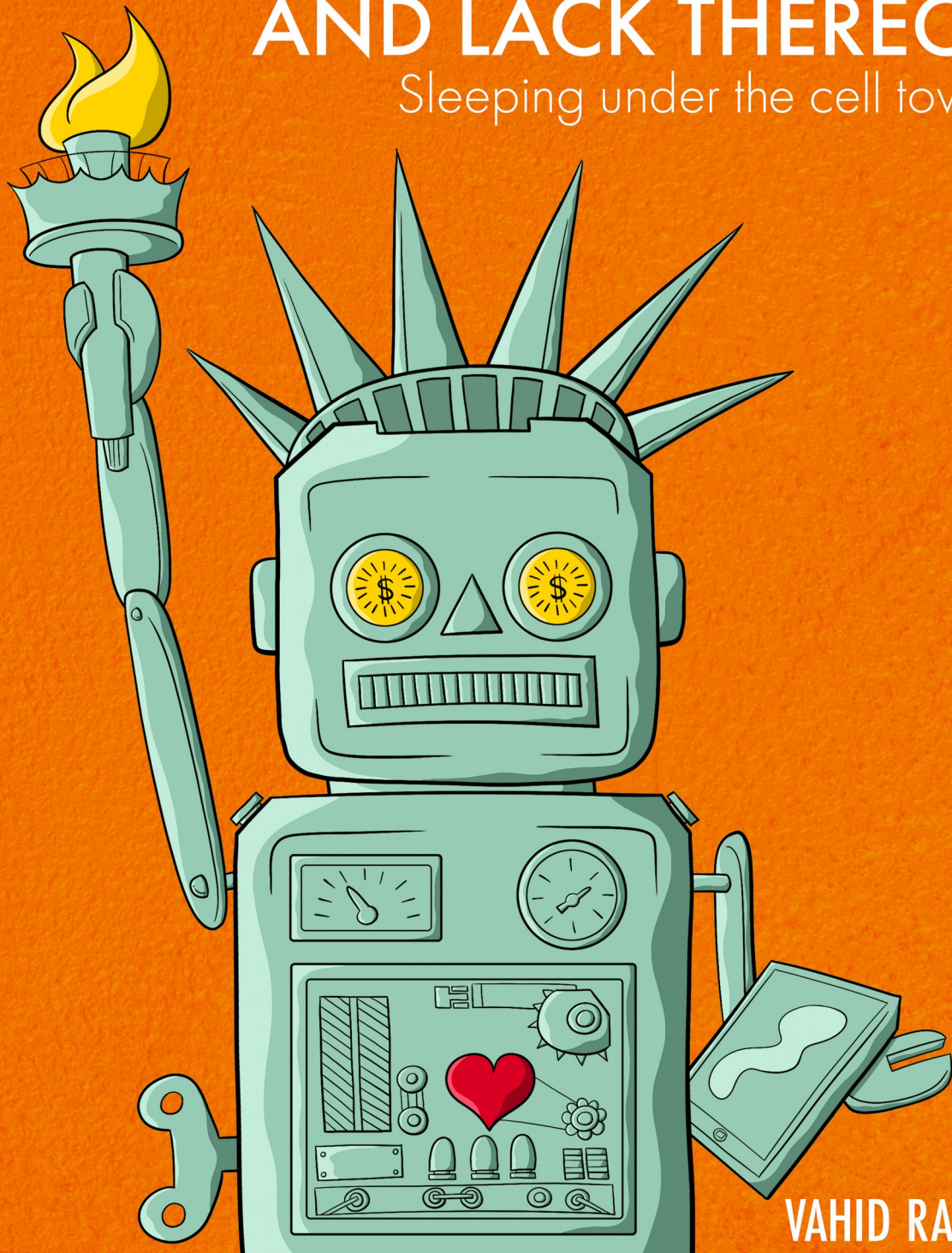


ETHICS IN TECH AND LACK THEREOF

Sleeping under the cell tower



VAHID RAZAVI

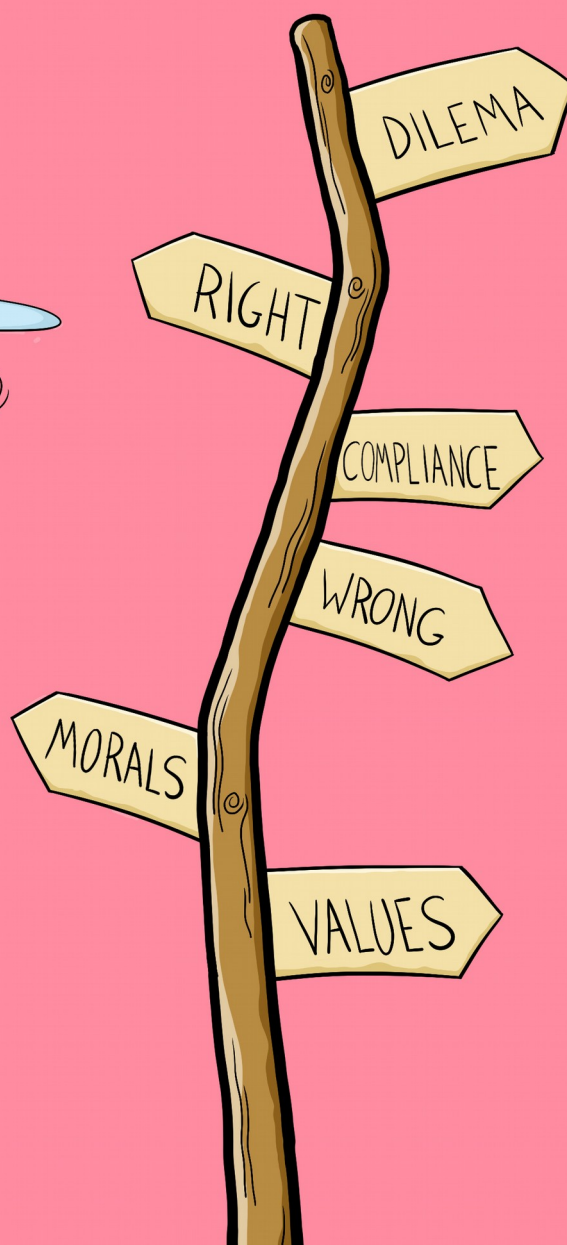
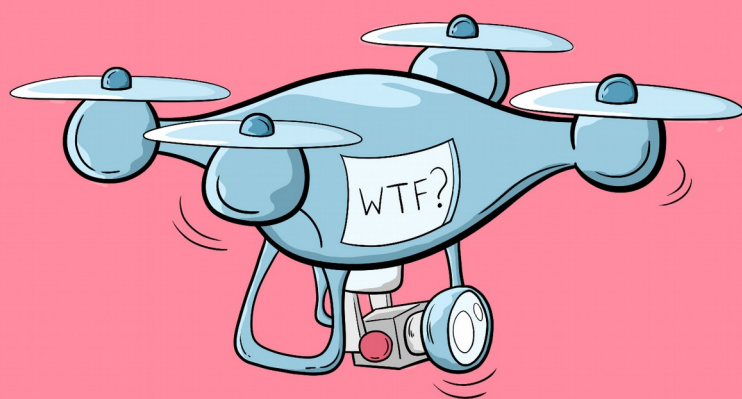
Ethics in Tech and Lack Thereof

2018

By Vahid Razavi

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(Further information at the end of this book)



ABOUT THE BOOK

This book tells my circuitous and tragicomic journey through Big Tech, as a startup founder and as an employee. While I appreciate the vast creative potential of new technologies, I critique aspects of the industry that I observed that lose sight of human values in the quest for profits and market share.

I hope to empower the public with the information to enable all of us to urge technology firms to use the great financial and cultural power they wield for positive ends.

In this book I suggest ways towards a future where tech firms move forward while considering the impact of their decisions on their workers, on the environment, and on consumers and the public (especially with civil liberties and privacy). Towards a future where Big Tech works for all of us.

Acknowledgment

I'd like to start out by thanking the kind and competent doctors at Stanford University, San Francisco General Hospital, and Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center Hospital and Rehabilitation Center who took such good care of me during my four-plus months of inpatient care. I acknowledge the loving care I received from kind nurses and physical therapists that helped me in my most desperate crisis.

I am forever grateful for the supportive family and the caring mother I have been blessed with, and I am truly sorry for the pain I have caused them in these past few years.

I am thankful to my colleagues in Belgrade, Serbia. While I was there they made sure I received the best medical care possible. I am also thankful to the Serbian police and ambulance services that took me to various hospitals while I was in need of care.

Many thanks to Brett Wilkins for his contributions to the book and Josh Sude for his cover design and illustrations. Finally, I am forever indebted to my employees and co-workers who stood by me in my hour of need.

Foreword

By Rev. Dr. Dorsey O. Blake

Vahid Razavi is a member of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, the nation's first avowedly interracial, interfaith congregation. I serve as its Presiding Minister. It is in this capacity that I first heard of the abusive and scandalous behavior toward Vahid from tech giants Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) and Amazon Web Services (AWS). Co-founding ministers of our church, Drs. Howard Thurman and Alfred Fist, believed that if people from various backgrounds — national, racial, gender, class — would come together and experience profound spiritual engagement through worship, there would emerge among them a unity that would undercut the barriers that often block that unity.

This founding principle is in total alignment with Vahid's head and heart. There was and still is on his part a commitment to somehow create a world that enhances the life of its people, one that works far more indelibly for the common good, one that includes and uplifts more definitively the marginalized and excluded. He has had faith that tech companies have creative possibilities for translating such a vision into reality.

Vahid writes: "While it should be obvious to you by now that the founder of a company called BizCloud is no anti-capitalist agitator, I couldn't deny what I was seeing before my very eyes; that is, the devastating effects of unregulated corporate capitalism... These forces had bought off the political and regulatory systems meant to keep them in check and I felt that I had to do something to at least tell the world that hey, I see what's going on and I'm not just going to stand by and watch it happen. Free enterprise is all well and good, but what our system has morphed into is heavy on the enterprise part but has forgotten the 'free.' Equilibrium needed to be restored to capitalism in order to save it from the worst aspects of itself."

This is what led Vahid to write the extraordinary book, *Ethics in Tech and Lack Thereof*. Vahid had shared with me much of the story of his combat with tech giants Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) and Amazon Web Services (AWS). Still, I was stunned by the depth of CSC's ruthlessness and the unbridled commitment to crush anything considered a rival or a call to be just. Nor, was I aware of the atmosphere of intimidation that saturated the work environment at AWS.

What happened to ethics in the ecology of work?

In most if not all religious or faith traditions there is something similar to what is called the golden rule. Look into Islam, Judaism Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and indigenous world views, it is there — the idea that one has a sacred responsibility to treat others as they would want to be treated. Such an ideal is inherent in and essential to creating a democracy that works. In a democracy one has the right to be heard, to defend oneself. Not only is this inscribed in the laws and mores of the United States, it is international law. I have anguished over this nation's sordid pattern and commitment to torture, to the practice known as rendition. Our government's contract with a private tech company to implement such a treacherous, illegal practice shakes the foundations of our moral order. Vahid makes crystal clear, however, that CSC is no ordinary tech company. He declares: "It is an old tech company with billions of dollars in support contracts for the military industrial complex and the surveillance state... In June 2013, British MP Margaret Hodge, chair of the parliamentary public accounts committee, called CSC a 'rotten company providing a hopeless system' after its utter failure to deliver as promised with a contract."

With so much financial capital why would it need to destroy Vahid's startup company, BizCloud. The idea that gave birth to BizCloud was that of providing "an online directory of businesses to keep documentation and applications in the cloud and share those documents freely with vendors or suppliers. We would provide data and "Software as a Service" and "Infrastructure as a Service" products to the business community." This was to be an important benefit to the tech world.

"A year and a half after we launched BizCloud, Computer Sciences Corporation, perhaps in a bid to rehabilitate its reputation, did what so many other companies do when they want people to forget their dirty deeds — it underwent a name change. Its products would now be sold under BizCloud." Vahid protested against this co-optation of the name of the company he had founded with creative protests and legal actions. In response CSC's unleashed its systemic power including its well-funded and connected legal network and forced Vahid to settle for much less than the worth of his company. As happens so often, the abuser is affirmed.

All of this pressure and defeat led to Vahid's landing in a mental hospital in Serbia. He writes with scintillating humor and sparkling spirit about his experiences there. For example, he shares that

cigarettes were a bargaining commodity in terms of developing relationships with staff and other patients. He shares that his eldest brother flew from the United States to visit him, bringing with him cigarettes. The brother himself has never smoked and keeps before Vahid the dangers and ill effects of smoking. The writing is priceless.

As an employee of AWS, Vahid experienced its disreputable, untrustworthy, pernicious nature personally and exposes the systemic nature of its deleterious malignancy. The experiences there necessitated and gave birth to *Ethic in Tech and Lack Thereof*.

He quotes an article in *Times* written by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfield that corroborated his experience of abuse. Kantor and Streitfield described a pressure cooker environment. Emails were sent at midnight followed by text messages the next morning asking why the email had not been answered. The article talked about fear permeating the work-place, blistering criticisms, workers brought to tears, workers having miscarriages and developing cancers, all related to the stress of the work environment. It depicted workers crying at their desks, workers passing out, and workers being brought out on stretchers and in wheelchairs, needing the assistance of paramedics.

Vahid was morally driven to write. He writes not only as a critic of tech abuses, but also as one who posits ways that could embrace the great possibilities of tech as a positive force in the nation and in our personal lives. He elucidates five areas of Ethics In Tech that need to be addressed:

1. Equality in tech
2. Employee-employer relations in the tech sector
3. The Environmental Impact of Technology Development
4. Privacy
5. Artificial intelligence

With all that Vahid has personally endured he has developed a centered presence which comes through in his writing. It is a deep well from which to draw to address the issues facing him and our larger society. He has pivoted and moves forward with confidence and strength. There is a peace that comes through when he suggests possibilities. Even a sense of joy accompanies his writing as he talks about ways to transform what is commonplace into something that enriches relationships.

He attributes much of that to his being exposed to the writings of Dr. Howard Thurman and his membership in The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples. There is a dynamic that needs to be understood. While Vahid is enriched by the church, the church is enriched by Vahid — by his integrity, love, generosity, knowledge, insights, courage, skills and commitment to the search for the common ground of all people forming a bond, a oneness, a relatedness. It draws strength from some reality greater than we are. It is a vision that impels and compels. Vahid's valor and audacity stand firmly in the tradition of which Dr. Thurman wrote about the founding of Fellowship Church:

The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men [people] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.

Is it possible that such could happen in the tech world? Let's inquire from Vahid for a response.

A Story to Tell

This is the story of how injustices perpetrated against me by technology companies quite literally drove me to madness. But it's also the story of something much bigger than just me. The crimes, misdeeds, and other unethical behavior that tech companies commit at the individual level are the same crimes they perpetrate on a global scale. If we are to prevent the latter, each of us must confront the former when we encounter them. Some people, even some close friends, have attempted to dissuade me from telling this story. They rightfully worry about the possible repercussions I might suffer as a result of publishing this book. I say rightfully because at the end of the day I've still got to eat, I've still got bills to pay. I live in San Francisco which is just about the most expensive slice of paradise on the continent! But I've decided to publish my story and let the chips fall where they may. I've been terminated, medicated, discriminated, litigated; I've lost jobs, I've lost my health, I've lost blood and treasure, I've even lost my damned mind — what the hell *else* have I got to lose?

After deciding to tell my story the next matter I had to settle was when — as in what year — to begin this book. Yes, it's my personal story but as I said, it's also a story that's much bigger than me. I found myself thinking more and more of the early 1990s, those heady days when newfound freedom was in the air as the Iron Curtain crumbled and a sense of the inevitable and permanent triumph of Western liberal democracy prevailed. Francis Fukuyama was hailing “the end of history” while the history of what would soon be recognized as one of the all-time most important inventions — the Internet — was mostly yet to come. In the self-congratulatory Western echo chamber caution was thrown to the wind as grand plans were hatched by those insatiable plutocrats, who the late, great George Carlin called “the owners of the country,” to penetrate and dominate global markets. In the 1930s there was a highly-decorated United States Marine Corps general, Smedley Butler, who got “woke” and realized that war is a racket in which corporations and the super-rich grow richer off the sacrifice of the poor and working class. Butler wrote and delivered a speech he called “War Is A Racket,” a powerful message in the spirit of Mark Twain's staunchly anti-imperialist missives during the Spanish-American War a generation earlier. Butler wrote that “the flag follows the dollar and the soldiers follow the flag.” ¹ In the early 1990s, as the Soviet Union and its empire collapsed, and as Germany reunified and Yugoslavia literally balkanized, multinational corporations

descended like buzzards on a carcass with imperial troops (both in the form of NATO expansionism and all-out war waged against Yugoslavia) close behind. Just as conservative politicians in the southern United States had to start devising a new language of subtle dog whistles in the 1960s once overt racist appeals were no longer socially acceptable, so too was a new lexicon required for the great neoliberal project of the 1990s. So we got “humanitarian interventions,” “structural adjustments” and all the other old dirty tricks couched in the new language of capitalism. And shining ever-brighter in the firmament of global capitalism were technology companies that, as you’ll soon see, were providing so much more than just computers and software.

I was taking my first tentative, naive steps into the tech industry in the 1990s. It was then, as it is still too much today, an industry dominated by white males. People of color were relative rarities, women even more so. In those days a woman was likelier to encounter sexism than a path to the top in Silicon Valley. Then there was me, still probably seeming more Iranian than American in the eyes of many, trying to break into the business. Yet somehow — no, not “somehow,” it was hard work, determination, luck, and more hard work — I “made it” in the industry. At one point I raised over \$25 million in capital for a startup. Then I decided to launch my own startup. It was a decision that would take me halfway around the world and on an incredible adventure that would change me in ways I never could have imagined.

The Balkans and the Birth of BizCloud

In August 2008 I left the United States for Belgrade, Serbia on a mission to hire graphic designers and developers for my new startup, BizCloud. The initial idea behind BizCloud was to provide an online directory of businesses to keep documentation and applications in the cloud and share those documents freely with vendors or suppliers. We would provide data and “Software as a Service” and “Infrastructure as a Service” products to the business community. It seemed natural to start a B2B company as enterprise was still at that time relatively underserved in comparison to the B2C space. Our SaaS and IaaS product offerings included business intelligence, demographics, and business information. We launched BizCloud in December of 2008. In our initial iteration we targeted enterprise owners and B2B service providers including business brokers, accountants,

attorneys, and others. We boasted a database of over 14 million US businesses. This treasure trove of data was combined with demographic information, creating a formidable document and image repository for business owners. We felt that this, combined with our SaaS business tools, would be a powerful combination. Our goal was to have our business data indexed by Google search results so business owners could maximize our platform's many benefits. We soon realized that Google wasn't going to index our page as BizCloud's extensive data wasn't considered "unique." God forbid a small company like ours dare aspire to get indexed and published when industry titans like Google and Yelp already had a large chunk of the 14 million businesses in our database! Even though our data was meant for a different purpose and audience we failed to get it indexed. We could have done so, of course, had we been willing or able to pay Google an exorbitant fee. There might be plenty of fuss being kicked up by issues surrounding net neutrality these days, but pay-to-play has been a huge part of the Internet ever since the tech giants rose to prominence.

In late 2008 and early 2009 the financial markets collapsed. We were caught off guard just like pretty much everyone else, although I had been warning for some time that the economic model embraced in the US and other "advanced" nations was a ticking time bomb on a short fuse. Then the crash came and we had no funding options besides my family's money and personal investments. Paying Google to index our data for optimal search results was absolutely out of the question. We needed a different approach. Instead of being a data-driven company we started to leverage content marketing under BizCloud and BizCloud Network brands. I hired an editor and a team of writers to cover the industry. In the six years that I ran BizCloud we produced over 5,500 articles and blog posts and over 100 videos focused on the burgeoning cloud computing industry, as well as cloud computing's impact on the business community. We became a cloud broker and executed our business plan to leverage content to sell cloud computing products to the business community. We also partnered with industry leaders and helped promote them via our content writers and custom professional videos.

I'm often asked why I chose Serbia. I was drawn there via Croatia, where I had previously traveled and first fallen in love with the Balkans. I'd been mixing business and pleasure — with probably more of the latter and not enough of the former. It was time to get serious, and that meant getting

myself to Belgrade as soon as possible. My first impression of the Serbian capital was it was a strange place to be. You could still see quite a few bombed-out buildings from NATO's 1999 "credibility" campaign against Slobodan Milosevic and Serb war crimes in the literally balkanized former Yugoslavia. A lot of Americans have no idea how much damage was done in their name and with their taxpayer dollars against the people of Serbia. We'll get back to this shortly, but since we're talking about first impressions of Belgrade, what I really remember is the vibrant city life, bustling cafe culture, and how everyone, even the less well-off people, looked incredibly stylish.

Long a gateway between East and West, beautiful Belgrade is a city of contrasts. It's one of the oldest cities in Europe but, as I mentioned, the people — especially the younger ones — exude a modernism reflected in the clothes they wear, the art they enjoy, and the way they interact with the people around them. As the former capital of the multi-national, multiethnic, and multi-faith Yugoslavian Federation, it's also a melting pot city where language, music, and food reflect a cosmopolitanism that would be the envy of many much larger global cities. The famous blue Danube and Sava rivers flow through the heart of the city, a timeless link between the Balkans and the nations of Central and Western Europe. The people of Belgrade are worldly and well-educated. It was as fine a place as any to settle in and start a business, even if we were about to experience the greatest economic calamity since the Great Depression.

We rented an office in downtown Belgrade. My days were spent there working with my team to grow BizCloud. We worked our asses off, but we also had a great time building the company and enjoying each other's company. We had what Americans call a great work-life balance, office morale was high, and we really felt a sense of accomplishment as we forged ahead with creating the best damned company we could.

Alas, within a week of my arrival in Serbia the financial markets crashed. The root cause of the crisis, conveniently forgotten by the same speculative forces that have brought us perilously close to the precipice once again as I write this 10 years later, was deregulation of the financial industry. For many decades — in fact, since the Great Depression — commercial banks were wisely prohibited from engaging in hedge fund trading with derivatives. But this barrier was shattered when President

Bill Clinton signed into law a repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act in 1999. Banks then started issuing interest-only loans targeting subprime borrowers, fueling a housing bubble that was exacerbated by historically low interest rates. Fraudulent underwriting practices nurtured predatory and other dangerously unethical and illegal lending to millions of people, many of them people of color, who should have known they couldn't afford six-figure mortgages. To make matters worse, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates just as the adjustable rates on the high-risk subprime loans started rising dramatically. Housing prices, which had attained ludicrous heights, began falling as demand dropped, with more and more would-be homeowners becoming unable to make their ballooning mortgage payments. These hapless millions found themselves underwater, unable to sell or to make payments. Cue the great foreclosure crisis. Meanwhile, the derivatives market collapsed and so did many of the companies that erstwhile engorged their coffers — and their executives' net worths — in the freewheeling casino economy.

Lehman Brothers was the first to go. It was September 15, 2008, a lovely late summer's day in Belgrade but sheer panic on Wall Street from what I was seeing and hearing from back in the States. However, by the time news of the Fed's \$85 billion takeover of AIG (which sold massive amounts of insurance without hedging its risky investments) reached Belgrade the following evening, you could feel the financial anxiety even where I was. Then came the battle over the \$700 billion bailout for Wall Street firms deemed "too big to fail," while the retirement and other investments of hundreds of millions of people around the world were tacitly deemed expendable. Washington Mutual, Wachovia, and other banks big and small folded in the ensuing financial bloodbath. This bloodbath now spread to the stock market as the Dow Jones Industrial Average, which had soared past 14,000 when it peaked in October 2007, plummeted to lows in the 6000s by the spring of 2009. The venerable Merrill Lynch was sold to Bank of America for \$50 billion, with bleak reports and predictions driving the market ever-further south. There was serious talk about the end of Chicago free market ideas as a near-panic set in.²

Occupy!

With so much taxpayer money being spent on bailing out the very corporations who were causing so much suffering for so many people, there was inevitably a public backlash against the big banks and their rapacious ways. The sentiment behind what would soon be familiar Occupy Wall Street chants like “banks got bailed out, we got sold out” was welling up as Main Street reeled while the “too big to fail” corporations got rescued. All across the nation and around the world more and more people were standing up and speaking out against what they perceived as an unjust economic order that prioritizes profits over people and rewards bad actors while punishing the most vulnerable among us. The crisis even sparked protests in Serbia where the dinar, the local currency, had lost over 20 percent of its value in just under three months. Even Serbian people were paying for America’s financial imprudence. People were starting to ask: If this is really a free market system, then why are we the people compelled to rescue banks and other companies that can’t keep afloat on the merits of their own policies and actions? What’s so free about “free” markets like that? What are the forces that lead to such a sad state of affairs and how can we ensure that policies are enacted that would avert such a disaster in the future?

Some even dared ask if capitalism was irredeemable, and if another, more just world was possible without capitalism. I wasn’t ready to take such a leap. I believed then, as I do now, that capitalism paired with democracy is the best system that this species of talking monkeys has been able to devise over the course of its relatively short evolution. I believe that our best hope for averting future financial crises (and the ravages of runaway economic inequality in general), is to put into place robust checks, balances, and regulations that would, if properly implemented and managed, help stabilize markets and avoid disaster. Unregulated capitalism is all the more dangerous when you consider the revolving door between politics and business — in which former government regulators go on to work in the private sector and vice versa. This is a classic example of the fox guarding the henhouse.

As I hinted, one of the silver linings of the Great Recession was the beginning of what would eventually come to be known as the Occupy Wall Street movement. Only activists would probably

remember this, but the whole idea for OWS originally came from a call to action by the self-described “culture jammers” at the relatively obscure Canadian anti-consumerism magazine *Adbusters* who proposed an “occupation” of Wall Street. Here’s how *Adbusters* editors Kalle Lasn and Micah White kicked it all off in an email to their readers:

Alright you 90,000 redeemers, rebels, and radicals out there,

A worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics is underway right now that bodes well for the future. The spirit of this fresh tactic, a fusion of Tahrir with the acampadas of Spain, is captured in this quote:

“The anti-globalization movement was the first step on the road. Back then our model was to attack the system like a pack of wolves. There was an alpha male, a wolf who led the pack, and those who followed behind. Now the model has evolved. Today we are one big swarm of people.”— Raimundo Viejo, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain

The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: We talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people’s assemblies ... we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future ... and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.

*The time has come to deploy this emerging stratagem against the greatest corrupter of our democracy: **Wall Street, the financial Gomorrah of America.***

On September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices.

Tahrir succeeded in large part because the people of Egypt made a straightforward ultimatum — that Mubarak must go — over and over again until they won. Following this model, what is our equally uncomplicated demand?

*The most exciting candidate that we've heard so far is one that gets at the core of why the American political establishment is currently unworthy of being called a democracy: We demand that Barack Obama ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington. It's time for **DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRACY**, we're doomed without it.*

This demand seems to capture the current national mood because cleaning up corruption in Washington is something all Americans, right and left, yearn for and can stand behind. If we hang in there, 20,000-strong, week after week against every police and National Guard effort to expel us from Wall Street, it would be impossible for Obama to ignore us. Our government would be forced to choose publicly between the will of the people and the lucre of the corporations.

This could be the beginning of a whole new social dynamic in America, a step beyond the Tea Party movement, where, instead of being caught helpless by the current power structure, we the people start getting what we want whether it be the dismantling of half the 1,000 military bases America has around the world to the reinstatement of the Glass-Steagall Act or a three strikes and you're out law for corporate criminals. Beginning from one simple demand — a presidential commission to separate money from politics — we start setting the agenda for a new America.

Post a comment and help each other zero in on what our one demand will be. And then let's screw up our courage, pack our tents and head to Wall Street with a vengeance September 17.

for the wild,

Culture Jammers HQ

Thousands of people showed up in Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, which was soon permanently occupied for months by the "99 Percent." The Occupy movement caught fire and before long a global movement of the "99 Percent" rose up to oppose hyper-capitalism and the economic inequality it sows wherever it goes. As someone who has been politically active since I was a teenager, I had felt the Occupy spirit percolating since those panicked days as financial giants fell in the fall of 2008.

I feel I should be clear about something here. While I may have been active in the Occupy movement and some of the campaigns that preceded it, I do not believe that capitalism is inherently evil, nor do I believe that the world would be better off without it. At least not in this day and age. That doesn't mean I can't oppose unethical or illegal acts committed by capitalists. While it should be obvious to you by now that the founder of a company called BizCloud is no anti-capitalist agitator, I couldn't deny what I was seeing before my very eyes; that is, the devastating effects of unregulated corporate capitalism. These forces had bought off the political and regulatory systems meant to keep them in check; I felt that I had to do something to at least tell the world that hey, I see what's going on and I'm not just going to stand by and watch it happen. Free enterprise is all well and good, but what our system has morphed into is heavy on the enterprise part but has forgotten the "free." Equilibrium needs to be restored to capitalism in order to save it from the worst aspects of itself. This is the angle from which I approached the Occupy movement: not as a destroyer of capitalism, but as a much-needed reality and balance check. A return to center was long overdue.

I was in Belgrade at the time but the Green Movement had also started in earnest in Iran and I wanted to get involved with that too. Many Iranians were courageously demanding the removal of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad following the sham election of 2009. They braved beatings and bullets as they took to the streets to demand an end to tyranny and corruption and to ask, "where is my vote?"

There was, in those heady but short-lived days, a spirit of unity and hope among Iranians that hadn't been seen in decades. It was the largest uprising in Iran since the Islamic revolution 30 years earlier — and the authorities responded with a bloody crackdown that left many dead, including Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old philosophy student whose shooting death, captured on cell phone camera, shocked the conscience of the world.³

The Age of Nepotism and Bombs over Belgrade

With so much turmoil in the world, it was admittedly a difficult task to remain focused solely on the

business of BizCloud. We all felt like we had so much to say; we wanted to speak out against the worst of what we saw unfolding around us and reassure people that there was hope, that a different, better world was indeed still possible. My Serbian team and I decided to devote our time to writing and publishing a book we titled *The Age of Nepotism*. I chose the title while thinking from a global perspective about how human beings treat each other and how we take care of each other during trying times. And then how, when we achieve positions of power, we bring in our families and our friends to help sell out our country and our values. We first launched a website and social media handles using the same name and highlighted not just issues involving Wall Street and capitalism, but also international issues like the Green Movement against the oppressive Iranian regime. *The Age of Nepotism* tried to highlight the global hypocrisy of war, poverty, and social injustice. We covered the crimes committed in the name of democracy across the globe, from economic crimes to inhumanity in Iran and the Arab world. You'll recall that this was just before the Arab Spring, a regional rejection of the repressive authoritarian regimes, most of them US-backed, that ruled over people from the Atlantic shore of Africa to the medieval fundamentalist regimes running Saudi Arabia and beyond. It would be more than another year before Tunisian fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi would kill himself in his fiery anti-corruption protest, but the spirit of the Arab Spring was welling up within the souls of countless millions of oppressed peoples across a huge swathe of the globe and that spirit was definitely palpable among the courageous men, women, girls and boys who took to the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities during the Green demonstrations.

The Age of Nepotism is part travel journal — like Mark Twain, I've always believed that travel is fatal to prejudice, part economic and social justice manifesto, part art project and part ramblings of a man on the edge. We didn't sell too many copies. But then again, that really wasn't the goal. I was observing and commenting on a world gone mad around me the best way that I could, and writing and publishing *The Age of Nepotism* was the crowning jewel of a lifetime of activism and an invaluable experience informing everything I would do going forward.

I initially hadn't planned on anything more than a short stay in Serbia. I arrived without even a hotel reservation and with only a Lonely Planet book to guide me. Fortunately, Belgrade welcomed me with open arms and great hospitality. That usually meant liberal pours of rakija, the local firewater, and hearty shouts of “živeli,” or “cheers!” I noticed similarities between Serbs and Iranians, like

how both are intensely proud and independent people who chafe at US bullying but nonetheless have a strong affinity for American people and culture. This was as true in the middle of the countryside as it was in cosmopolitan Belgrade. Once, for example, when my credit card for some reason wouldn't work after I filled up my tank at gas station on the way back from visiting a friend's village, the proprietor let me leave on the promise I would return with his €40. I loved visiting villages, meeting my colleagues' families (I met so many lovely old grandmas and grandpas) and being guests in their homes. I also often found myself just wandering the streets of Belgrade, not really knowing where I was going but discovering new adventures around every corner.

As I interacted more with average Serbians in farmers markets and around town I discerned some hesitation to speak in English. People would ask if I was from the United States, to which I would reply affirmatively before being hit with some or another version of "you bombed us." I would then share that I am Iranian-American and they would laugh and say something like, "watch out, you are going to get bombed next!" We would both then inevitably smirk, smile, and say our polite goodbyes. The people of the Balkans are very educated in local and international affairs. They are politically attuned. This is partially due to geography as well as brutal scars of wars that have not yet healed with time. Serbians had many reasons to fear the United States and other Western powers. When the former Yugoslavia was breaking apart, the Western powers did nothing to help the region's economy and were simply content with a free-fall. Then came the US-led NATO bombing campaign of 1999 — which still haunts Serbs to this day, 20 years later.

All sides committed atrocities during the decade or so of fighting in the region after Yugoslavia began disintegrating in 1991. Croats ethnically cleansed Serbs during Operation Storm in Krajina, Serbs ethnically cleansed Bosnian Muslims and Croats, US-backed Kosovo Liberation Army terrorists — some of whose fighters had trained with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan — ethnically cleansed Serbs.⁴ And Serb leader [Slobodan Milošević](#) was certainly a war criminal. But by selectively amplifying Serb atrocities in order to wage a war against the Serbian people, and by publicly stating the purpose of the slaughter was to "preserve NATO's credibility," President Bill Clinton and his allies were rightfully viewed by Serbs as warmongering hypocrites. There can be no

doubt that NATO warplanes were targeting the Serbian people as much as, if not more than, the Serbian military. The bombing killed as many civilians as soldiers, deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure including the power grid, water supply, bridges, railways, and even mass media.⁵ Because NATO wanted a “zero casualty war” — for its pilots, that is, not for the Serbian people — its warplanes flew at such a high altitude that bombs inevitably “accidentally” hit a loaded passenger train, a hospital, a crowded market, a nursing home, fleeing refugees, a house 30 miles away in Bulgaria, and even the Chinese embassy.⁶ The US blamed that last one on “outdated maps.” When it was all over, hundreds of men, women, and children were dead, with many more wounded. Also critically wounded was the Serbian people’s trust in Western nations and institutions. But Serbs are remarkably resilient people, endowed with a uniquely dark sense of humor. They bore the bombings’ brutal brunt, buried their dead, dusted themselves off, and went about their business. You could see and hear their defiant humor on the streets of Belgrade in everything from the jokes people were telling to morbidly-named businesses like “Boom Sandwich.”

Considering US history and behavior in the Balkans and indeed around the world, I can really understand why my BizCloud Co-workers in Serbia were initially quite reluctant to collaborate on a political book. They were understandably wary that I might not have the best interests of Serbia or the region in mind and feared that I might not represent the truth. However, after they heard my experience of leaving war-torn Iran they agreed to work with me on *The Age of Nepotism* as well as on BizCloud. I would have highly capable and enthusiastic partners as I worked to report on and uncover social injustice from Wall Street to the streets of Tehran during the Green revolution. We intrepidly set out to inform and educate the world — but especially Americans — about Balkan geopolitics. I really felt we were in a position to see beyond the religious and ethnic divisions and differences that have caused so much pain and suffering in the region and across the planet.

Rendition as a Service: Enter CSC

While researching *The Age of Nepotism* I learned about the US extraordinary rendition program that the CIA was operating in the

Balkans and around the world. Suspected terrorists and innocent men alike were being kidnapped

off the streets of European cities and towns — indeed cities, towns, villages, and countrysides worldwide. They were then flown to third countries or CIA “black sites” where they were interrogated, often tortured, while they were imprisoned indefinitely without charge or trial. Neither the Geneva Conventions nor basic human decency applied. To keep its illegal rendition program secret, the US government hired Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC), an old technology company with billions of dollars in support contracts for the military industrial complex and the surveillance state. You might be wondering what on Earth a tech company was doing getting involved in covert illegal kidnapping. Let’s just say that CSC is no ordinary tech company.

Founded in Los Angeles in 1959 by Fletcher Jones and Roy Nutt, CSC initially made its name creating programming tools — mainly assembler and compiler software. Jones and Nutt launched CSC with just \$100 in operating capital; however, within four years it was America’s largest software company. It offered its software services to major players in the burgeoning tech industry, including IBM and Honeywell. CSC’s first major proprietary software was called Computax and was a big hit with accountants. By 1965 Jones was worth \$20 million and appeared in a *Time* magazine feature article on young millionaires.⁷ The following year, CSC won its first government contract: supporting a NASA computer laboratory in Alabama. By 1968 annual sales topped \$53 million and the firm became the first software company to go public, listing on the New York Stock Exchange. By then, CSC was operating in nine countries. At the dawn of the 1970s, Jones took on his most ambitious challenge yet: a nationwide computer network he called Infonet. Meanwhile, CSC further developed its relationship with the US government while expanding its overseas operations, including launching a computerized air cargo handling system for London’s Heathrow airport.⁸

The 1970s were a tumultuous time for CSC. A series of cash crises, the death of Jones in a 1972 plane crash, and stiff competition in the rapidly growing software market all took their toll on the company. So did its first major failure to deliver to a customer — the aborted contract to develop a phone-based horse race betting system for New York City’s Offtrack Betting Corporation. CSC took months to get the project up and running, allowing competitors to enter the fray while ultimately operating only about half of Offtrack Betting’s customer betting terminals.⁹ However, government contracts saved the company, providing about half of its revenue by mid-decade and leading to

warnings from industry analysts that CSC was overdependent on such contracts. The company expanded globally throughout the 1970s and into the '80s, becoming NASA's fourth-biggest customer and acquiring competitors mainly in the healthcare and systems integration industries. In addition to government contracts, CSC grew by servicing large corporations including General Electric and Travelers Insurance. By 1986 CSC annual revenue approached \$1 billion.^{[10](#)}

“A Rotten Company”

By this time CSC had long since crossed over to the dark side, if you will, by signing many highly lucrative contracts with the US military and military-industrial complex corporations, including a \$186 million office automation deal with the US Air Force — the organization that has killed more innocent foreign civilians than any other armed force on the planet. In 1990 CSC won a four-year, \$70 million contract with the Army Communications and Electronics Command, followed the next year by a pair of Army computer systems contracts worth over \$800 million. The 1990s saw CSC ink a mammoth 10-year, \$3 billion deal with General Dynamics, one of the leading military-industrial complex players, while spending hundreds of millions of dollars acquiring smaller competitors in the information technology space.^{[11](#)}

Internationally, CSC also did business with some of the world's most repressive regimes, including the brutal Shah of Iran, although the company's most grievous human rights violations would come much later. But aside from these violations, CSC was developing something of a nasty reputation for late, over-budget or even fraudulent work. “CSC fraud” was a thing long before I ever came up with the name for my website and campaign! In fact, the US Securities and Exchange Commission first charged CSC with fraud in 1980, accusing company executives of conspiring to defraud taxpayers of more than \$3 million and of bribing a federal contracting officer. The SEC indictment alleged CSC obtained inside information to help win a \$100 million National Teleprocessing Services contract, then inflated the cost of some of the computer programming provided to federal agencies between 1972 and 1977.^{[12](#)}

In 2015 the SEC charged CSC and eight former executives including former CEO Michael Laphen

and former CFO Michael Mancuso with manipulating financial results and concealing significant problems about the company's largest and most high-profile contract: a multi-billion dollar contract with Britain's National Health Service (NHS). The SEC accused CSC of accounting and disclosure fraud beginning back when it learned that it would lose money on the NHS contract because the company couldn't meet certain agreed-upon deadlines. CSC agreed to pay a \$190 fine to settle the charges, with Laphen returning more than \$3.7 million in compensation under the terms of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. He also agreed to pay a \$750,000 penalty. Mancuso agreed to return \$369,100 in compensation and pay a \$175,000 fine. In addition to the accounting and disclosure fraud in connection with the NHS fiasco, SEC investigators found that CSC and finance executives in Australia and Denmark fraudulently manipulated financial results of company business in those countries as well. In June 2013 British MP Margaret Hodge, chair of the parliamentary public accounts committee, called CSC a "rotten company providing a hopeless system" after its utter failure to deliver as promised with the NHS contract.¹³

The problem wasn't just in Britain. CSC was one of several contractors hired by the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to modernize the behemoth agency's aging tax filing system. CSC told the IRS it would meet a January 2006 deadline but failed to do so, leaving the agency without any electronic means of detecting tax fraud. CSC's failure reportedly cost the IRS between \$200-\$300 million. Fast-forward to May 2013 when the company found itself in hot water again, this time forced to pay a \$97.5 million fine to settle a class action lawsuit filed by investors claiming it provided false statements regarding the aforementioned NHS contract.¹⁴ As bad as they are, these incidents — which mostly involved money and not human lives — pale in comparison to the human rights violations committed by CSC during the so-called war on terrorism.

Road to Rendition

Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States the George W. Bush administration instituted a series of policies and actions that shocked the world's conscience, violating both the law and any sense of human decency. He launched a global war against terrorism that is still being fought 17 years later, a self-described "crusade" against "evil" targeting half a

dozen countries, all but one of them having absolutely nothing to do with 9/11. He made torture official administration policy and vastly expanded state surveillance powers. He embraced extraordinary rendition, the extralegal practice of sending captured suspected terrorists to third countries for interrogation and imprisonment. In addition to sending detainees to countries where US officials knew they would be tortured, the United States also rendered suspects to Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and to a network of secret CIA prisons known as “black sites” in over a dozen countries; there, they were held without charges and without access to lawyers or the Red Cross. Many men and women (many of them innocent) were tortured at these sites. The locations ran the gamut from the national security headquarters in the African nation of Gambia to an upscale horseback riding academy in Lithuania.¹⁵ Current CIA Director Gina Haspel supervised one such black site in Thailand where, shortly before her arrival, terrorism suspect Abu Zubaydah was subjected to the simulated drowning torture known as waterboarding some 83 times in a single month. It turned out that none of the allegations against Abu Zubaydah were true, and it was later revealed that he was being tortured despite the fact that he was cooperating with his interrogators.¹⁶ Other prisoners at CIA black sites were hung by chains from ceilings for days on end, stuffed into boxes, deprived of sleep, shackled naked in cold temperatures and subjected to mock executions. These were just some of the tortures detainees faced in US custody. Scores of friendly nations, as well as some of the world’s most ruthlessly brutal dictators (including Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and the mullahs of Iran) gladly participated in Bush’s rendition regime.¹⁷ The US outsourcing of torture and interrogation required specialized transportation and logistical support, and CSC was there to answer Bush’s call.

CSC’s road to rendition began with its March 2003 \$914 million acquisition of DynCorp, an aviation and vehicle services and security firm that earned almost all of its revenue from government contracts. DynCorp was also notorious for its lack of ethics and for the criminal behavior of some of its personnel. In Bosnia, for example, American contractors hired by DynCorp on US military bases were actively engaged in sex trafficking, buying and selling women and girls as young as 12 as personal sex slaves. The girls, who were mostly trafficking victims from Eastern Europe (but who also included locally abducted women and girls), were sold in local bars and brothels to the DynCorp hires for as little as \$600 by organized crime groups. Slavery was so widespread that DynCorp employees proudly paraded around town with their girls. They even

brought them to company functions. When they grew tired of them the men often sold their slaves back for 50 cents on the dollar; the girls were then often re-sold in turn to other DynCorp employees.¹⁸

Ben Johnston, a helicopter mechanic hired by DynCorp at an army base near Tuzla, recoiled in horror when one day he heard one of his co-workers, a man in his 60s, boasting that his girl “was not a day over 12.” Johnston often witnessed these child sex slaves playing with other kids, their American owners watching over them nearby. He told Salon that at least seven of his co-workers told him they owned slaves. One even claimed to own half a brothel; he called himself “pimp daddy.”

Johnston then turned whistleblower. He informed the Army Criminal Investigative Command (CID), which got a DynCorp employee to admit to buying a sex slave. He also dropped the dime on other DynCorp personnel, including a site manager. Then the case was closed. Nobody from DynCorp ever faced any charges for their crimes. Bosnian police tried to pursue the case, but DynCorp hastily whisked its implicated workers out of the country. The worst that would happen to them is that they would lose their jobs. Ben Johnston was also fired. He sued and settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.¹⁹

In Afghanistan, DynCorp contractors bought drugs and rented young “dancing boys” — a euphemism for what the State Department called “a culturally sanctioned form of male rape” — to “entertain” the Afghan police that the contractors were paid to train. “Dancing boys” are dressed and made up as girls before performing delicate dance routines at all-male gatherings. The boys are then usually forced to have sex with their “owners.” Such behavior spurred the Pentagon to propose a ban on defense contractors involved in human trafficking or sex slavery. However, no less than five military-industrial complex lobby groups representing firms including DynCorp, Haliburton, and KBR rallied to defeat the noble measure.²⁰

This was the company CSC acquired in 2003. Almost immediately it set to harnessing DynCorp’s aerial transport and logistics assets. There was a new war on, and wartime is profit time for the

corporations that are the cogs in the gears of the military-industrial complex. CSC bills itself as “a global leader in providing technology-enabled business solutions and services.” The company’s website explains that it helps “solve big, technically complex, mission critical challenges.” One of these challenges was the extralegal transportation of kidnapped CIA torture victims. CSC sold off its DynCorp units in December 2004 claiming they did not fit with the company’s information technology focus. New York-based private equity group Veritas Capital paid \$775 million in cash and another \$75 million in preferred stock, while CSC retained DynCorp’s information technology business. CSC had reaped some \$1.6 billion in revenue from the divested units during the previous year. Still, documents obtained by the UK-based human rights group Reprieve revealed that after 2004 CSC was still performing rendition-related work for the US government, and when Reprieve wrote and asked that CSC sign a “zero tolerance for torture” pledge promising that the company would not participate in extraordinary renditions, it refused.²¹

Khaled El-Masri

The best-known of all of CSC’s rendition victims is an innocent man named Khaled El-Masri. Born in Kuwait to Lebanese parents, El-Masri grew up in Lebanon before immigrating to Germany during the Lebanese civil war. He eventually married a German woman, obtained German citizenship, divorced, and remarried. El-Masri settled in Ulm in southern Germany, where he worked as a car salesman and raised five children with his second wife. Late in 2003 El-Masri made the fateful decision to take a short vacation in Skopje, Macedonia. While traveling there by bus, he was detained by Macedonian border authorities on New Year’s Eve 2003 because his name is unfortunately similar to Khaled Al-Masri, an alleged al-Qaeda terrorist who also happened to live in Germany. They also falsely believed his passport was fake.

Macedonian security officials abducted El-Masri, who was then 42 years old, interrogating him in a hotel room for over three weeks before contacting the local CIA station. That’s when El-Masri’s real nightmare began. Alfreda Frances Bikowski, who headed the al-Qaeda division at the CIA’s counterterrorism center, decided on “a hunch” that El-Masri was a terrorist and designated him for rendition. On January 23, 2004 — more than a month after leaving his family in Germany — El-

Masri was transferred from Macedonian to US custody. CIA operatives then stripped, hooded, shackled, sodomized, and drugged the innocent father. It's what the agency liked to call "capture shock."22

Kidnapped and subjected to total sensory deprivation, El-Masri was flown halfway around the world, first to a brief stop in Iraq and ultimately to a secret CIA black site in Afghanistan known as the "Salt Pit." That's the notorious interrogation (read: torture) center where just months earlier suspected Afghan militant Gun Rahman was beaten, stripped naked from the waist down, and chained to a cement wall in near-freezing temperature where he froze to death. His family was not notified, nor was anyone ever punished for his death. In fact, Jose Rodriguez, the CIA official responsible for Rahman's death, was commended and awarded a \$2,500 cash bonus for his "consistently superior work."23

None of this boded well for poor Khaled El-Masri. Indeed, the innocent German was regularly beaten during the course of his interrogation. He was also sodomized again and was jailed in a small, dirty cell where he was underfed and given rancid water to drink. Meanwhile, the CIA had examined El-Masri's passport three months into his detention, determining that it was legitimate and that his continued imprisonment was unjustified. The agency knew it had made a glaring error in rendering El-Masri and discussed internally how to fix it. One proposal involved secretly flying him back to Macedonia and leaving him there without informing German officials, denying everything if he ever spoke out. Meanwhile, a despondent El-Masri went on a hunger strike, demanding his American jailers give him due process or watch him die. After 27 days without eating — a period in which he lost roughly a kilogram, or 2.2 pounds, daily — he was granted a meeting with the black site director, a CIA operative known simply as "The Boss." He admitted that El-Masri was being wrongfully imprisoned, yet refused to free him.24

In April 2004 CIA director George Tenet was informed that El-Masri was being wrongfully held, and by the following month national security adviser Condoleezza Rice ordered his release. This is when US officials first notified their incensed German counterparts that the CIA had kidnapped El-Masri. On May 28, 2004 he was again hooded and shackled. A CSC plane then flew him out of

Afghanistan and dumped him on an Albanian roadside at night. He was offered neither an apology nor any money or resources for him to get home to Germany. El-Masri believed he was about to be shot in the back and left to die. What ended up happening was that he was arrested by Albanian security officials who thought he might be a terrorist due to his disheveled appearance. When he finally made his way back home to Germany, El-Masri tragically learned his wife had left him, taking their children with her to Lebanon because she believed he had abandoned them.25

El-Masri wanted the justice he'd been denied for so long. With the help of the American Civil Liberties Union he filed suit in the United States against Tenet and other CIA officials, alleging violations of US and international human rights law. However, El-Masri was denied justice yet again as a federal district judge ruled against him in May 2006, despite finding that he "suffered injuries" and "deserve[d] remedy." The judge explained that he had no choice but to dismiss El-Masri's lawsuit because it posed a threat to national security — a justification often used to sweep government misdeeds under the rug.26

Germany then took up El-Masri's case, issuing arrest warrants for 13 CIA operatives in connection with the unlawful abduction and imprisonment of a German national. Ignoring a warning from the Bush administration Berlin forwarded the 13 warrants to Interpol, although the German government later caved under pressure from Washington and ceased pursuit of the matter. Later, the Spanish National Court would ask for arrest orders for the 13 CIA agents involved in El-Masri's kidnapping, although nothing would come of this request either. Finally, in May 2012, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Macedonia bore responsibility for El-Masri's torture and awarded him €60,000 (US\$78,500 at the time). While the United States has never apologized, Macedonia finally issued El-Masri a formal apology in April 2018.27

CSC: Torturers Become Thieves

A year and a half after we launched BizCloud, Computer Sciences Corporation, perhaps in a bid to rehabilitate their reputation, did what so many other companies do when they want people to forget their dirty deeds — they offered a new product under a new brand. CSC's products would now be

sold under BizCloud.

CSC was also a Fortune 500 firm with a global footprint. The company's notorious business practices as a failed technology provider were by then well known in United Kingdom. It had failed to deliver on promised system upgrades to Britain's vaunted National Health Service, with work running longer and far more expensive than promised. Meanwhile, back in the US, the company kept winning lucrative government and military industrial complex contracts. It was during this period that poor Khaled El Masri's vacation nightmare began, with CSC ultimately cashing in on his return trip home. In doing so, it became the first tech company to provide Rendition as a Service offering.

CSC launched its pilfered version of BizCloud in February 2010, years after our trademark was filed. The day CSC launched the glorified server private cloud offering it called BizCloud, we notified the thieves that they were infringing on our intellectual property and trademark. We informed them that we wanted nothing to do with them and that our core values were different from theirs. I felt strongly about protecting our name and our brand. CSC failed to respond to our numerous requests to cease and desist. They continued to infringe on our good name. Seeing that CSC never took our trademark cease and desist seriously, I decided to fight back using a two-prong approach. We would focus our business at BizCloud and expand our online footprint with more cloud computing and business content in addition to increasing our partnership with various cloud computing providers. While simultaneously building BizCloud I purchased a number of CSC domains, including CSCSucks.com and CSCFraud.com. We launched CSCFraud as an online repository of CSC's corporate crimes including its "RaaS" program and its many failed customer and government contracts — one of which led to a British parliamentarian to brand CSC "a rotten company."²⁸

We targeted CSC at every opportunity. In addition to the aforementioned websites, I also created CSCSucks and CSCFraud Twitter handles. Every time CSC issued a press release or made news in any way we were right there, active on all our websites, Twitter handles, and other social media pages, informing and educating the public about CSC's many crimes and misdeeds. We bought targeted advertisements for CSCFraud during CSC-hosted and other trade shows and conferences,

especially ones involving the company's partners. Here is a sample of our direct action at the VMWare annual conference, "VMWorld 2013":

Join US for a Direct Action from Monday, August 26th through Wednesday, August 28th at the VMWorld Conference at Moscone Center From 12:00 PM to 2:00 PM

Boycott 2013 VM World Gold Sponsor CSC & Help Preserve The 4th Amendment

NSA Outsourced IT to CSC: CSC, the "Rotten Systems Integrator" that runs NSA's internal IT system, defense, and intelligence, CSC as a contractor is making millions of dollars selling technology and services that help the world's largest surveillance system spy on us!

Crimes Against Humanity: CSC was responsible for the infamous CIA torture rendition flights across Europe. CSC chartered airplanes and facilitated the infamous torture of Khaled Al-Masri, a German Citizen. He was abducted and tortured onboard a plane provisioned by CSC. Read More At <http://CSCSucks.com>

Investor Deception: In addition, CSC has deceived investors with irregular accounting practices. The accounting irregularities expand multiple continents. Read More At <http://CSCSucks.com>

Failure to Deliver To Its Customers: Furthermore, CSC has failed to deliver to its customers (e.g. NHS) as well as depriving UK tax payers by failing to deliver on its promise. In the UK the Computer Science Corp CSC is known as the "Rotten Company"

While under investigation by the UK parliament for failing to deliver on NHS, being sued by its own shareholders for irregular accounting practices, and being investigated by the European Union Commission for Human Rights, CSC continues to receive defense & private sector contracts. The CSC the system integrator or "Geek Squad" of the NSA embodies the essence of what the Preserve The Fourth Amendment should stand against!

Somehow the technology and financial industry analysts have missed the red flags

on CSC's unethical business practices. Please help take a stand by asking VMWare Management & CSC Partners to discontinue support for this inhumane, incompetent, and menacing organization. Learn more about CSC Defense Contracts awards! "Rotten" CSC, the "systems integrator" that runs NSA's internal IT system, defense, and intelligence!

Visit <http://CSCFraud.com> http://Twitter.com/CSC_Fraud Join US on Facebook at: [Facebook.com/CSCBoycott](https://www.facebook.com/CSCBoycott)

Before earnings calls, I would personally contact CSC Wall Street Stock analysts informing them of who we were and why we did not want to be associated with the assholes at CSC. I'm not sure how effective this strategy ultimately proved, given the moral and ethical ambiguities of corporate capitalism in general.

I also fought back by launching an anti-bullying campaign I called #CloudBully. I figured, who hasn't been bullied at one time or another in their lives? I'm a short Iranian with kinky hair, you think I haven't been bullied? With the rise of online bullying and social media, I believed I could raise awareness and make a real impact utilizing Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and other platforms. I invited bullying victims to share their stories and even had a promotion in which I gave away an iPad. The idea was to use crowdsourcing to stop big companies like CSC from bullying their smaller competitors and to tackle the overall problem of online bullying.

In addition to CSCFraud, associated sites, and the #CloudBully campaign, I launched EthicsInTech.com with the motto "Got Ethics?" Ethics In Tech aimed to create awareness around ethical use of technology in service of protecting and expanding individual rights and freedoms. We supported the agenda of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), and Restore The 4th. I personally covered the Restore The 4th protests, including "1984 Day," and had a chance to interview Daniel Ellsberg. Mr. Ellsberg is a whistleblower and longtime activist best known for leaking the Pentagon Papers to media outlets, an action which revealed decades of US lies and atrocities in Southeast Asia and ultimately helped to end the Vietnam War. After Edward Snowden, a modern-day Dan Ellsberg, made international headlines for

leaking frightening and infuriating details regarding global mass surveillance by the US National Security Agency, we launched NSA Comedy events at tech conferences like Data Week and the RSA Conference. Through my community outreach to Occupy SF and SF 99% Coalition we also organized small protests at downtown San Francisco's Moscone Center to target CSC while it participated in the VMWorld Conference. We did this in 2012 and again in 2013. Our protests were held at VMWorld events during lunchtimes for maximum impact; CSC was a gold sponsor of the annual VMWare conference. One year we wore Anonymous-style Guy Fawkes masks during our demonstrations to draw extra attention, and we also filmed our interactions with the San Francisco Police Department outside of VMWorld Conference for the world to see. A couple of the cops would interact with us, sometimes alternating between giving us grief while mocking us and then expressing genuine interest in why we were there.

There was one surly, burly officer who was always on my case. He was probably the oddest cop I've ever encountered. He looked like he'd been on the force since the '89 quake and had something of a "cool cop" air, if there's such a thing. This guy was a real piece of work. He had Grateful Dead stickers on his baton, which looked as if it had cracked a few Occupy Wall Street heads in its day. I couldn't figure out whether he put the stickers there because he was a bona fide Deadhead or because he got off on cracking hippie skulls. He would always ask us how long we intended to carry on our demonstration. When we informed him that we'd be out there as long as we felt necessary, he asked if we didn't have anything better to do with our time. I asked him, "What's more important than standing up against crimes against humanity?" He didn't have any cute retort to that. Another cop — a hulking yet jovial fellow with as much hair on his head as CSC has ethics — liked telling us that he knew who we were despite our masks. We engaged in a spirited back-and-forth about when it is and isn't legal to wear masks in public.

We walked a tightrope of an uneasy peace with these and other cops, and in the end even Officer Deadhead was curious about CSC's crimes. He asked why we were out there and what we hoped to accomplish with our protest. Of course he didn't get it. We were simply exercising our right to freedom of speech in order to highlight CSC's inhumanity and to defend our reputation. The officers didn't understand that, nor did the vast bulk of VMWorld attendees we attempted to reach,

to be honest. Nevertheless, we remained steadfast and undaunted. We decided to also target CSC partners and customers on social media. I like to think that we took a little bit of the wind out of their sails every time CSC made an announcement.

People would sometimes ask me why I had it out so bad for CSC and why I was waging such a Quixotic struggle against a giant corporation. To this I always retorted that I was *not* at war with CSC, that I just wanted to get my story out while raising awareness of how a highly-respected tech giant was participating in one of the greatest US crimes of the so-called War on Terror. I'd be stupid to go to war against tech giants. They're huge multinational conglomerates and I'm just me. The best I can do is to create awareness about their unethical and even criminal business practices with the hope that consumers will vote accordingly with their purchasing power. But boy, CSC sure did make it feel like a war sometimes, and I didn't even know the half of it yet.

On December 31, 2013 I was shocked to learn we were being sued by CSC for *using our own trademark*, BizCloud. CSC sought to invalidate all of our hard work and our very brand identity. BizCloud — the *real* BizCloud, *our* BizCloud — has been a registered trademark in the United States since 2008. Knowing full well that it would not be awarded the trademark by the US Patent and Trademark Office, CSC filed for European trademarks nearly two years after we launched BizCloud. The company tried to back-door its way into a European trademark and then use that to invalidate our US mark. Never mind that both companies are headquartered in the US.

CSC's lawsuit, which was basically a big middle finger to us and great insult added to injury, is the exact opposite of how an ethical corporation would react when they get caught fraudulently using someone else's name and trademark. That's not just my opinion, it's actually my life's experience. In late 2009 I learned that NTT, Japan's largest telecommunications company, launched a product called BizCloud. We sent NTT a press release, in Japanese, threatening legal action, and the company agreed to change the product's name. All they asked was that we give them a few weeks to come up with a new name. They were kind enough to back down from using a name that wasn't even exactly the same as ours, and kindness isn't something you expect to experience at the hands of one of the world's biggest and most powerful communications corporations. Even though we

were glad, we didn't think NTT was being very clever by doing this; they should have partnered with us! But NTT showed that ethical business practices are possible even when a company as big as they are would have had no problem rolling over us if push had come to shove. A year later, when we pursued a similar strategy in our bid to get CSC to stop stealing our property, we got nothing.

Taking On Titans

I wasn't going to let the torture enablers at CSC steal my company's name and trademark (as well as its good reputation) without one hell of a fight. I knew a lawsuit was our best chance at justice, but there was a huge problem. I was unable to secure outside capital to fund our legal defense and this battle was going to be a monumental expense that none but those with the deepest pockets could afford to fight and win. Nevertheless, we felt we stood on solid legal ground. Our suit, filed in the United States District Court, Northern District of California, targeted not only CSC but also AT&T, Cisco Systems, VMWare, and EMC — all of which partnered with CSC's BizCloud knockoff—alleging trademark infringement plus unfair competition and business practices under the Lanham Act and California Business and Professions Code. We showed how CSC failed to cease and desist using BizCloud's name and trademark, how its infringement confused and deceived the public, and how this corporate malfeasance caused us irreparable harm. We proved that by using BizCloud's name and mark without our approval, or without properly paying for any license, the defendants' infringement was intentional. We knew it was a real-life David versus Goliath scenario we were getting into, but we felt sure that the facts of the case at hand would weigh heavily in our favor.

One reason why trademark law enforcement is so expensive is the need for expert testimony. Even though we owned the trademark and domain and could show examples of confusion in the marketplace caused by CSC's theft, we still needed experts to testify to this in court. Who are experts? They're usually university professors in trademark law or industry analysts who charge \$500-\$1,000 an hour or more, usually with a 50-hour minimum retention. They are very expensive for anyone, let alone an organization of our size. Whoever has the most money gets the most and best experts. Considering the size of CSC and its deep pockets we decided to at least put up a good

fight for as long as we could. During the subsequent six months from December 2013 to June of 2014 we expanded our legal representation with two freshly-minted attorneys who agreed to represent us on a contingency fee structure. At our initial and only court-assigned mediation I made it very clear that we would only settle the BizCloud matter via mediation. At no time was I willing to sacrifice my First Amendment rights and delete the CSCFraud or CSCSucks websites or content. In addition to suing CSC, we filed suit against a number of CSC Partners that were now reselling and infringing upon our trademark by marketing the CSC BizCloud product. These partners included VMWare, Cisco, AT&T, and EMC. Through it all, we continued to make headlines of our own by leveraging paid PR Wire distribution services to announce our lawsuits against CSC and its partners.

As part of the legal back-and-forth of our lawsuits we had already provided plenty of examples of confusion of our company and trademark within the tech sector caused by CSC's trademark theft. We had been marketing a public cloud offering under BizCloud, and CSC was selling a "glorified server" private cloud with the same name as our business.

On mediation day we came prepared with records of our revenues from cloud brokerage via our content marketing efforts. My own attorney showed up late on mediation day. We were then placed in a small room while CSC occupied the courtroom in show of strength, as they were confident they owned the court system. Before mediation both parties had agreed to disclose revenue numbers associated with BizCloud. I can assure you that the revenue numbers that CSC's BizCloud had produced belied a dismal and pathetic cloud computing business offering. Clearly, CSC is much better at getting awarded military industrial complex contracts for rendition flights than it is at selling cloud computing products. For a small company of our size we had done much better than CSC on revenue per employee in regard to the BizCloud trademark. During the session the mediator asked us to disclose our revenue numbers; the mediator repeatedly tried to pressure us to include other topics besides BizCloud. I made it very clear that I would not sacrifice my constitutional rights unless CSC acknowledged its crimes against humanity. CSCFraud was not up for mediation during the BizCloud trademark dispute.

For a brand that took six years of my life and family fortune to build, CSC offered less than what I

could buy a used recreational vehicle after Burning Man for. I had no intention of sharing my brand with CSC, and I refused to take the offer. We walked out of the San Francisco courtroom without reaching a settlement.

That evening one of my attorneys did not join us for dinner, and then suddenly quit without recommending any replacement representation. We were left defenseless. My out-of-state attorneys needed a local lawyer as they were not licensed to practice law in California.

Within two days of the failed mediation my attorneys contacted me to change our fee agreement from contingency to pay-up-front. With an expected legal budget of \$700,000, we couldn't imagine how we would be able to continue to pursue justice. Like many startup and small business owners in America who have been harassed by larger corporations, we faced the prospect of watching everything we'd built die simply because we could not afford access to a fair legal process. With no legal representation to help us enforce our US-registered intellectual property rights, I had no choice but to take the offer and share our brand with CSC. According to my own lawyer, we'd gotten a "rotten deal."

Belgrade Breakdown

As soon as we reached a settlement I booked a flight to see my co-workers and friends in Belgrade. I wanted to explain to them what had happened and I sorely needed a sympathetic ear. My dear friends in Serbia welcomed me with open arms. Over the previous six years I had come to know my co-workers' families, many of whom treated me as if I were one of their own relatives. I loved the hospitality, friendly smiles, and cultural diversity of the Balkans. Ethnic groups in the region have been at odds over differences for decades, but to be honest, I can't distinguish between the peoples of the Balkans based on looks alone. In the US I have a dear friend who is Croatian, and from Bosnia to Croatia to Serbia I have always been warmly welcomed. This time was no different, at least until things started going pear-shaped on me.

My first week in Belgrade was quiet. I was focused on catching up with old friends and trying to relax in the face of CSC's overt hostility. I spent those early days getting back into my Belgrade

groove, reacquainting myself with the city and the life I'd left behind there; then it was time to get down to some business.

Later in the week I spoke with my attorneys. CSC had made two requests: In addition to sharing our name with CSC, I would also be obliged to destroy all records of revenue numbers shared by CSC during mediation. But the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was that we could no longer maintain our political activism against CSC. We would need to take down the CSCFraud and CSCSucks websites and stop using the associated Twitter handles. Even though we never agreed to give up our freedom of expression in the final mediation agreement, we were now being told we could not speak negatively about CSC. Our activity highlighting CSC's ruthless cruelty had nothing to do with the BizCloud trademark dispute; I'd never agreed to settle Ethics In Tech or my own personal beliefs against CSC while settling the trademark dispute. I barely slept that night. I was so shocked and disappointed by how my case for BizCloud had turned out. It boiled my blood to have to share the BizCloud name with the inhumane corporate criminals of CSC. The worst part, besides having to share our name, was not being able to shine any more light on the company's global crimes and misdeeds.

It was all just too much to handle. You can say that I lost it that night; I spent the entire following day going to different embassies wondering how intellectual property and constitutionally protected free speech rights could be so easily taken away. It was clear to me that it was a bullshit kangaroo court system that serves only the interests of large corporations and the super-rich, not small business owners and everyday people who suffer so much as a result. What followed was a mental breakdown, right there in Belgrade. No embassy wanted to see me over such an impertinent issue that none of them had anything to do with; I wasn't thinking clearly at the time. Of course it now sounds crazy that I would go from embassy to embassy seeking redress, counsel, or even sympathy from people that had as much to do with my problem as a polar bear's got to do with Tahiti, but this is what I did under the tremendous emotional stress and pressure I was feeling at the time. I've forgotten how many embassies I went to that day, but I'll always remember that it was outside the Turkish embassy that Serbian police arrived to see what was up with this embassy-hopping Iranian-American going on about intellectual property theft and free speech.

The Serbian police officers were polite and professional, but there was no way they were just going to let me walk away. Not that day. It was clear that I needed help, so they called for an ambulance, in which I was driven to a Serbian mental hospital for evaluation. That's where I experienced my first manic episode. The hospital was dark and foreboding as they strapped me to down to a bed just like doctors do in the movies. My restraints were so tight that I had no room to even wiggle. The loss of freedom and anxiety over which unknowns came next was terrifying. All of this and so much more raced through my head. Imagine being strapped down in a foreign mental hospital without any allies or even means of effective communication. Nurses then attempted to administer a sedative to put me to sleep but I resisted and broke the syringe with my thumb; I was full of terror. After all, I had covered and read all about the atrocities in the region committed by the CIA, chiefly its extraordinary rendition program. I also knew very well that the CIA paid CSC to transport rendered terror suspects. In my manic state I had no idea if I was really being detained in a Serbian mental hospital or if I was about to be kidnapped, hooded, and sodomized before being whisked off to some black site. I was very thirsty and yelling to the nurse. It was dark. I suffered a massive panic attack exacerbated by mania. That was one of the longest nights of my life.

The next morning I found myself in a well-run psychiatric ward filled with patients in one large room. I'd torn my clothing during the previous night's struggle when nurses had strapped me to my bed and sedated me. A nurse offered me clothes but I refused them and instead walked around wrapped in hospital bed sheets. Over and over I kept thinking about how I was crushingly disappointed that a small business like ours could ultimately have absolutely no brand or intellectual property protection — things the big players took for granted. I was even more disappointed that we had to settle with a notorious company like CSC.

Now, if you ever find yourself in a Serbian mental hospital, I offer you two pieces of advice. First, don't smile. People in the Balkans just don't smile that often in these kinds of situations. I doubt if anyone really does, but this is especially true in Serbia. If you smile too much in the mental hospital they might think you are *really* crazy. Second, be sure to ask your friends and family to bring you cigarettes. Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, smokes in the hospital, from the director and doctors to the orderlies and cook. Cigarettes are a great way to make friends with other patients and staff, and

smoking just makes the time go by faster. I was lucky enough that during my first few days my eldest brother flew from the States to visit me. He was my source for cigarettes even though he's never smoked, and he gives me lectures to this day about the dangers and ill effects of smoking.

My days were spent talking NBA basketball with the other patients in the ward. Serbs love basketball. You may recall that Yugoslavia, of which Serbia was the core component, actually bested the United States to win three world basketball championships in the 1990s and early 2000s.²⁸ Even during the darkest days of US-Serbian relations, Serbs still watched NBA games, cheering Peja Stojaković, Vladimir Radmanović, Marko Jarić, and other homegrown stars along with their favorite American players. They're crazy for basketball in Belgrade, and the sport proved a superb icebreaker as well as a great way to pass the time and tedium of institutionalization.

I also hung out quite a bit with an elderly woman who was always trying to steal my cigarettes. She must have been 65, and looked like a sweet old lady that could be my grandma. She would feign interest in me and my predicament all in hopes of snagging my cigarettes when I let my guard down, but I tolerated it because she was nice, and I was bored.

Everyone I met in the hospital was nice, and that includes the staff, who never mistreated me. After the paranoia of the first night had subsided I ultimately gave in to the nightly injections. After one week, I was released and billed €1,200 (around \$1,600 at the time) for a full week of treatment, accommodation, and meals. Later I learned that this was a fantastic bargain when compared to rates in the US.

During my last night in Serbia I had a chance to see a couple of my dear colleagues. I gave them BizCloud's video production equipment and promoted our main editor Marijana to company president. I just didn't want to be associated in any way whatsoever with CSC's torturous business practices.

Stateside Crisis

I was back in the United States within 24 hours of being released from the hospital. I experienced mixed emotions upon my homecoming; I was glad to be out of the mental institution and back in the comfort and familiarity of the States, but I also regretted depriving my co-workers of income by just quitting on them. Prior to my departure to Serbia I had planned two events and still wanted to carry them out. The first of these events was to see my ex-colleagues from my Exodus days of the late 1990s. From 1997 to 1999 I'd worked in field sales for Exodus, one of the first pioneers of colocation; I was in my early 20's when the company went public. I learned so much at Exodus — where I enjoyed the kind, supportive culture and innovative business practices which revolutionized the data center and outsourcing sectors — that I still hold my colleagues and my memories from this company in high regard.

Before my breakdown, I was asked to produce videos and interview the company's founders and other executives (including my own boss from that time) for a 20-year reunion celebration. I would not want to miss this opportunity to see these folks. The videos from these interviews can still be found on the old BizCloud Youtube channel.

Back in my Exodus days the Internet was still in its relative infancy. Innovation is what drove companies' success, and there was no need for dirty money from rendition programs. Now it seems as if every tech company is willing to sell its soul to government and intelligence agencies just to get a slice of that sweet federal funding pie. According to Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, intelligence agency contractors today are awarded close to 70 percent of the total budget of these agencies. From your personal information to your phone calls, emails, and social media, all forms of electronic communications are consistently and broadly monitored by bad actors in the private sector working on behalf of these agencies. This data is available for sale in bulk. Your privacy is a total fucking illusion.

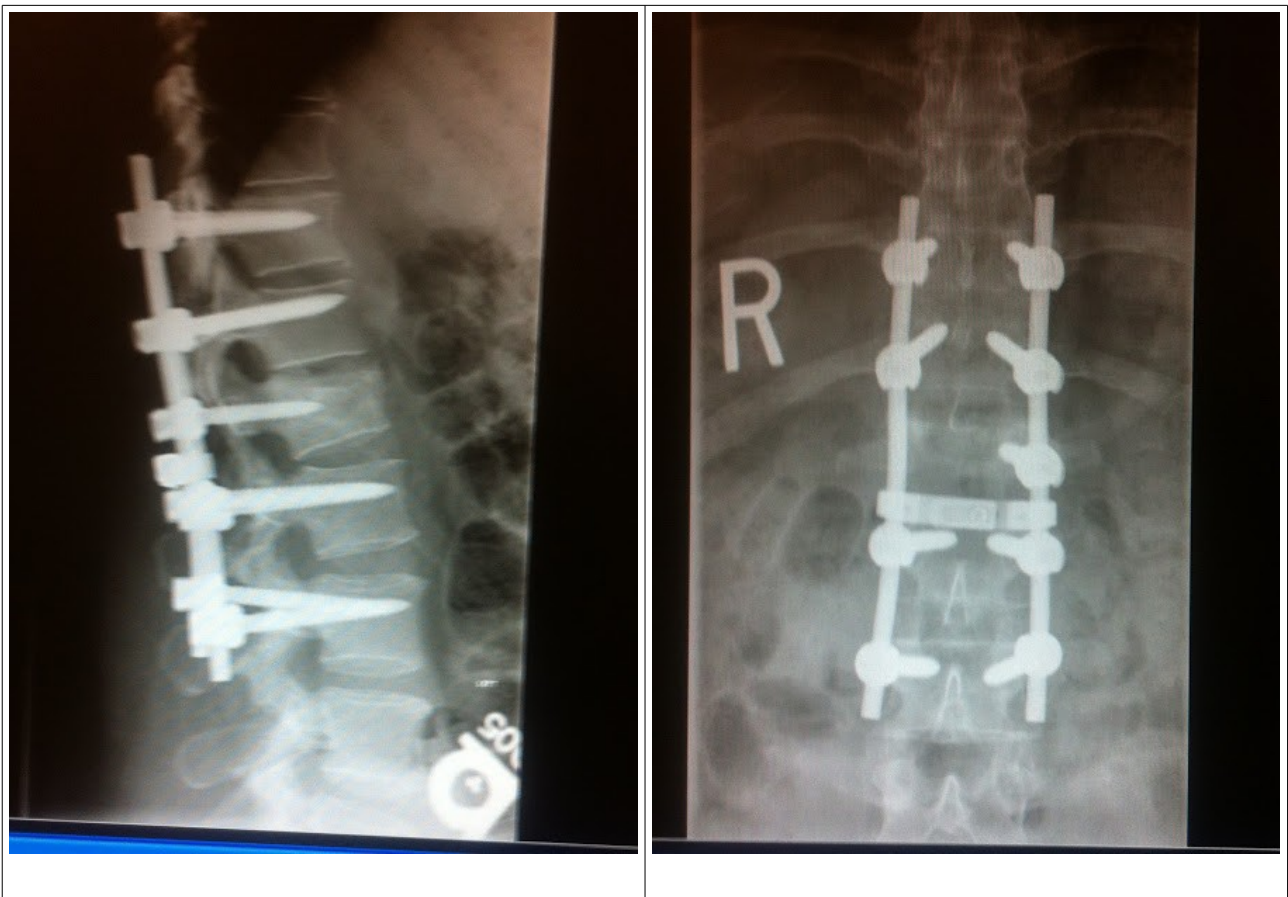
Back in the days of Exodus we were selling colocation and data center services to other startups. It was a different era with different business values from today's. Now, still associated with BizCloud, I felt that I'd lost my values. The bullshit legal process had led to my intellectual property being shared with the tech industry's worst, most heartless and malicious company. Our second event, to

take place the following week, was Data Week and another NSA Comedy night. I wanted nothing to do with any of it. I had another manic episode and mental breakdown.

That weekend, as I was reviewing the videos of Exodus executives, my mind raced with thoughts about BizCloud and our upcoming trade show sponsorship. As I reviewed the previous videos that I'd produced of our various events (from NSA Comedy night to Restore the 4th and 1984 Day), I realized I could have nothing to do with Ethics In Technology or BizCloud while our brand was associated with CSC and its cohorts.

After Serbia I went home to spend a few days at my mother's house. One evening, as she was busy preparing dinner, I decided I wanted to end my life. I wanted nothing to do with this rotten world — I had no interest in surrendering my values and representing BizCloud. With my bare hands I picked up every speck of dirt from my mother's balcony and threw it over. I then proceeded to throw all of the furniture and plants from the balcony. Finally, I undressed and tossed my clothes over before walking to the ledge and jumping, feet first. Flying through the air did not last long. I hit the ground hard with both legs. All I remember is feeling the sharpest, most excruciating pain in my back, and the feeling of being disappointed with myself because I was clearly still alive.

I was lucky. I'd tried to kill myself next to the best research hospital in the world, Stanford University Hospital in Palo Alto, CA. At Stanford they scanned my back and discovered massive injuries to my vertebrae, as well as a fractured pelvis and two broken ankles. In addition, I was diagnosed with being Bipolar Type 1. Thanks to President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act, aka Obamacare, I spent a week in Stanford Hospital. The good doctors there did a great job patching me up. Here are some photos to prove it:



I spent a week at Stanford Hospital and three more weeks at San Francisco General Hospital's psychiatric ward before I was finally transferred to Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center for three-and-a-half months of recovery. God only knows what I would have done if it weren't for Obamacare; I certainly wouldn't have had health insurance, let alone the financial means to pay for the tremendous medical costs I'd incurred. I am forever grateful to the countless medical professionals who helped me. They were all kind, highly dedicated, and competent. I was wheelchair bound and could not put any pressure on my broken ankles; even in the wheelchair I had to wear a back brace. It was a humbling experience. Not being able to use a regular restroom was the worst part.

Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center is mostly end-of-life hospice care; they have adults who are much older that suffer from chronic health issues. I remember one of my roommates had dementia and would fight with all his strength against the kind nurses who would come to his bedside. Being in the hospital for that long is an indescribably sad situation to be in. From my hospital bed I Skyped with friends and co-workers in the Balkans to tell them that I was finally quitting BizCloud for good and that I no longer wanted to be associated with the brand I had

worked so hard to create; I quit. I transferred ownership of the company to them along with my controlling stake. Within a few months of my suicide attempt my team decided to shut down the business and BizCloud was no more.

It was October 2014, which any San Franciscan will tell you is the month that the Giants started another incredible playoff run, eventually winning their third World Series title in five years. As the final jewel was being set in the Giants' dynasty crown, my broken bones were also being set. I wasn't going anywhere; I would cheer on the Orange and Black from my hospital bed. The bad news in this situation is obvious. The good news is that I had friends who would visit me and sneak me little comfort items so that I could still celebrate. They would bring me those little bottles of Jack Daniel's you get on airplanes or at the liquor store counter and I'd mix them with Coca-Cola so I could enjoy the occasional cocktail. This probably wasn't the best idea. I didn't consult with any doctor, but I can't think of a physician who wouldn't at least grudgingly concede that a little bourbon might help in alleviating my excruciating pain and the crushing boredom of being stuck in one spot for months on end. The length of my stay at Laguna Honda Hospital went far beyond the World Series, past fall, and into winter. The weeks plodded along until Christmas and New Year's Eve had passed and it was 2015. I was still laid up in bed feeling as miserable as ever.

Thank God for my family and friends, around whom my world pretty much revolved while I was hospitalized. My mother took two buses to visit me just about every day. She'd bring me all sorts of delicious home-cooked Persian treats and fresh fruits like pomegranates. She really is the sweetest mom in the world and I feel horrible about what I put her through. My suicide attempt took a heavy toll on her, and I am so grateful for her unflagging and unconditional love. It was even her idea to tell people that I "fell off" her balcony while helping her do yard work. After all, the whole situation was pretty embarrassing for her too, being that I jumped off her balcony in her community — a senior citizen center as cliquy as any junior high school. With those old ladies, gossip spreads faster than California wildfire and I'll be damned if I was going to be the reason my sweet mother was subjected to that disturbance of her peace; she's 83 years old.

In addition to my mother and brother, my dear friend Mike Rufo would come over with his guitar

and keep me company. Other activist friends, including members of Occupy Wall Street, also showed up in a big way. Friends from Los Angeles to Florida came and wheeled me to the animal petting zoo inside the hospital where I made fast friends with a couple of cute goats and cats. I was blessed to have such great friends and concerned relatives. To save face, I told the white lie that I had been doing repair work on the balcony when I'd slipped and fallen. I did not want myself or my family to be associated with the negative stigma that mental illness and suicide carry. Unfortunately, society considers it much better to have a broken back than to have a mental illness... or at least that's how I thought people would perceive me and my bipolar disorder.

Despite those spirit-buoying visits from loved ones, I was still largely bored out of my skull while I was recovering in Laguna Honda Hospital for four months — especially being that I was in a hospice care unit, where people are basically waiting to die. There wasn't a whole lot to do there other than watch TV or explore the possibilities of the Coke machine. I decided to get on Tinder and see what all the online dating hype was about. The thing is, Tinder is proximity-based. I was more likely to be matched with the girl next door, and in this case that meant she'd probably end up dying on me. And even if I do find someone, I thought, what am I going to do? I'm in the hospital. I'm sharing a room with another patient. He's psychotic. This poor fellow kicks other patients, nurses, and doctors; it takes five people to control him. Imagine me, in the condition and environment I was in, trying to find my true love on Tinder. Talk about looking for love in all the wrong places!

I knew it would be better if I focused my energies on righting my own life before searching for someone to share it with. I filed for personal bankruptcy from my hospital bed. A kind attorney was willing to come to my bedside to hash out the paperwork. While I closed the chapter on BizCloud and filed personal bankruptcy to get my financial house in order, I turned my attention toward finding full time employment. All of my aspirations for running a tech company had run up against a brick wall, and all I wanted was to work in the same market segment of the cloud computing industry and get back on my feet again; I started to interview in earnest while I was still in the hospital. The hospital bed is not most comfortable place from which to conduct job interviews. I was bedridden with a busted back, broken ankles, and no ability to even use the toilet on my own, yet I kept on interviewing and looking for the right opportunity. The challenge was not the phone interviews, but rather how I would perform when it came time for the inevitable face-to-face

interviews. I would have to use a wheelchair just to get to work and back. As part of the online application process for each employer I disclosed all of my disabilities, even my bipolar disorder. When I was discharged in late January 2015 I still had to use a walker to get around for the first few weeks while I underwent extensive physical therapy. I spent a good few hours each day looking for a job that I thought would be right for me. Since the 1990s I have spent most of my career as a business executive working for companies such as Bay Networks, Exodus, Qwest Communications, Fast Search and Transfer, and finally BizCloud. There was something right for me out there. I just had to find out what.

Welcome to the (Amazon) Jungle

While recovering from my injuries I wanted to get back to work in the tech sector. I was looking for a job that would reflect my background and industry experience in cloud computing. The biggest and largest provider in this space was Amazon Web Services (AWS). At that time, AWS had 10 times the business of its next 14 competitors; it was complete market dominance. Amazon had thousands of partners and over a million customers, so when I saw an opening for a senior alliances manager I jumped on it. In May of 2015 I was contacted by an Amazon recruiter regarding a position in the channels and alliances team for big data and analytics partners.

My hiring manager was a four-year Amazonian, a true bar-raiser, and I hold him in high regard to this day. I felt welcomed and open, so I shared my work at BizCloud and Ethics In Tech. We even joked about my NSA Comedy events. The interview process at Amazon was rigorous. I first had to deliver a PowerPoint presentation to the team about finding the right partner for channel marketing strategies. I was then interviewed in 45-minute increments by six other Amazonians.

It was a rigorous process, but I was excited about the opportunity and my prospective boss. The interview process flew by. Shortly after they gave me first a verbal and then a written job offer, contingent upon a full background check. I accepted the offer, as it was a generous package with a start date in late June 2015. I would be tasked with managing a handful of select AWS strategic technology partners in the big data space and with acting as a single point of contact to assist these organizations and grow their businesses by partnering with Amazon Web Services. I would be doing

everything from developing a to-go market strategy, to solution development, joint marketing, field enablement, and more. Within a month of my hiring my manager was reassigned to a group outside of the channel and alliances organization. A new boss was hired; he only lasted eight months. Finally, a general manager was brought in from VMWare. He was its director for cloud computing at the same time that I was protesting outside VMWorld annual conferences against CSC rendition flights and torture.

The GM then hired an attorney to be my boss. During my first year at Amazon, two out of the five partners I managed earned the vaunted Amazon Partner of the Year award, but for some reason this was not enough. Both the GM and my new manager created a toxic, backstabbing work environment; I became their target. They started a witch hunt to find, or gin up, issues with my performance where none existed. I heard many rumors about how they repeatedly attempted to document problems they could peg on me even though we had only met once.

I would have had no issue if they'd had the balls to just fire me because of how I stood up to CSC and its partner VMWare. I'd utilized every legal method granted under the First Amendment protesting those bastard companies and their inhumane business practices. I am proud that I ran social media campaigns against them and filed lawsuits to protect the BizCloud brand from the tarnish of association with CSC. I might have suffered a severe spinal injury but I was nevertheless brimming with backbone. My back was broken, but when it came to standing up to tech bullies and their inhumanity I never broke my values.

In August 2016 I was extremely stressed out due to the hostile work environment. Depression set in and my bipolar disorder reared its ugly head once more. Seeing the red flags, I checked myself into Stanford Hospital. I spent three nights there for evaluation under psychiatric care; I could no longer tolerate the back pain that was greatly exacerbated by work-related stress and my prior suicide attempt. I spent the next few months at Stanford's Pain Management Center while on a short-term protected medical leave of absence. From burning the nerve endings in my back, to deep tissue massage and acupuncture, I tried everything I could in an unsuccessful quest for relief. As if all this wasn't bad enough, I still had to deal with work supervisors who seemed hell-bent on finding

something, *anything*, they could use against me as a pretense to show me the door. As you can see by my co-worker K——'s response to the inquisition-like email below, he was taken back by my managers' line of questioning and couldn't for the life of him figure out why they seemed out to get me:

D— ,

I spent some time with J— , Y— , and M— yesterday. Both mentioned challenges I have working with Vahid. Not sure where that is coming from. Just to be clear, I have no issues working with Vahid. I think there are areas where he can improve but that is definitely true for me as well.

Thanks.

If you asked anyone who'd worked with me I bet they would tell you something similar, but the persecution continued. Management's war against me involved more than just talking to my co-workers. The new manager, working on behalf of the GM, cancelled my participation at ReInvent (AWS's annual conference) on two separate occasions. I'd attended ReInvent my first year at the company; however, the following year he passed me over in favor of new employees freshly hired to our group. After multiple back surgeries I finally returned to work in March 2017. Amazon had denied me long-term medical leave due to the fact that my injuries were self-inflicted and caused by a suicide attempt. On the day I returned I saw brand new personnel starting in our channel alliances group; they were being given partners and accounts to manage. I was told directly by the GM from VMWare that all of my partners had been reassigned. Consider this: Amazon Web Services has over 30,000 partners, and 100 is considered strategic. Here I was returning from a lengthy but protected medical leave and they couldn't even find five additional partners for me to manage? Feeling burned yet again, I fired off an email to CEO Jeff Bezos explaining my situation:

Dear Jeff,

I am one of many thousands of your employees and I wanted to share with you my experience working for Amazon for the past two years. As you read my story, consider if this represents the company that the [NY Times](#) has described or the one that you have articulated in [your response to Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld](#)

[article.](#)

My story is as follows; I was brought on in June of 2015 after a rigorous onsite interview process led by S— as a Senior Alliances Manager for Big Data and Analytics. My job was to work and manage a select few Strategic Partners of AWS. Over the course of these two years I ran the partnerships and the GTM strategy for some of AWS's largest ISV partners. The workload changed over time and I have managed anywhere from three to seven partners as per instructions from management at different times. These partners included companies such as Splunk, Tableau, Informatica, and others. With the support of the management team and fellow Amazonians we worked hard on building joint solutions and executed a GTM strategy with these partners. As a result of our combined efforts, Amazon Web Services was recognized as Alliance Partner of the Year by both Splunk and Tableau. I had the honor of accepting the award on behalf of AWS at Splunk's SKO in March of 2016.

In August of 2016 I took a medical leave of absence for the first time in my career of 20 plus years. My medical leave was extended due to my disability. Shortly after I was placed on medical leave, a new manager J— was brought on. I had the chance to meet him in person, as I was on his interview loop during lunch when he was first interviewing at AWS. I have never worked with him in any capacity outside of having a lunch meeting with him. Per the attached email during my absence, J—, under the direction of senior management, solicited unwarranted feedback on my performance from my fellow co-workers. Specifically, he was fishing for challenges associated with my performance.

As you can see by the response from the segment lead for big data and analytics attached to this email, he is dumbfounded as to the reasons behind this solicitation and the language used in requesting such feedback. I would like Amazon to extend a professional courtesy and share with me the reviews that J— has collected in my absence so I can identify areas that I can improve on. I would value any solicitation and feedback as long as it is in team spirit of improving our performance and not to our detriment when we are absent from work due to illness.

My request for extended medical leave was denied so I returned back to work without any restrictions or limitations. Upon my return from the medical leave, I meet with D—, the GM for Global ISV and Tech Partners, and he informed me that he has hired my replacements, that he has no positions within his current team for me. In addition, he said he would be open to considering a new role in one of his

ISV teams as an Inside Partner Representative qualifying inbound marketing leads on behalf of our partners in a new hotline that he wants to set up for them. He made it clear that this position has not yet been created but he would like me to work in this capacity.

I ask you, do you think that is a fair progression of my role within your organization? Would you feel comfortable making such a recommendation after reviewing my background and experience? I ground my teeth in inside sales for Bay Networks back in the 1990s. I gained a vast amount of valuable skills as a result but I did that over 20 years ago. It is disheartening that after 20 years and the past two years accomplishments with AWS that this is the position that AWS management has in line for me. Please do not misunderstand me, I just don't see a reason for a passive aggressive management style. They could simply ask me to leave.

Since I have been back I have seen a number of interview loops for similar position to the one I had prior to my medical leave. We are currently hiring Partner Development Managers in San Francisco office. I would like to know why I am not being considered for those opportunities and encouraged to take an inside sales role?

When I accepted the award on behalf of AWS at Splunk SKO I had much hardware installed in my body. Regardless of my disabilities, I can still stand and make an impact on the partnership and business relationships on behalf of the company that I work for. I hope I have an opportunity to use my current skills within Amazon Web Services.

Extending a leave of absence to employees with a disability would be considered reasonable accommodation, and I am grateful to Amazon for providing me with this leave. It would also be considered reasonable accommodation to be considered for a similar role to the one I had prior to my medical leave.

I know how we Amazonians love long narratives. For the sake of being concise, I think I will save a few thousand words and share three pictures. The first two have to do with my physical disability and shows some of my operations. The last photo is from Splunk SKO accepting the Alliance Partner of the Year Award in 2016.

As the CEO and founder of Amazon and my employer you have the right to know

what takes place in your organization. Only you truly know the answer to my question above in regards to: what story does my history with Amazon represent — NY times, or your response?

Thank you for the opportunity of working for your company for the past two years.

Sincerely,

Vahid Razavi

Senior Alliances Manager

Big Data and Analytics

I received a response from Amazon HR acknowledging that my work conditions had indeed changed, but instructing me to continue working with my boss to resolve any issues I had. That's right, Amazon was telling me I should continue working with a boss who was actively trying to disparage and discredit me.

Then, within 10 days of my return to Amazon, the channels and alliances team announced a strategic partnership with DXC, the new combined company of CSC and HP selling BizCloud. DXC said that its alliance with AWS would make it easier for its enterprise customers to unlock the efficiencies and innovations of the cloud and that it would offer service-integrated solutions for AWS.³⁰ Following this announcement, my treatment at Amazon grew much worse. I sent a second email to Jeff Bezos explaining how my work had changed. I was now basically a glorified water boy. That's really not hyperbole; I'd been reduced to ordering meals for the team and escorting candidates on days that the office was under construction (when most other employees were asked to work from home). I would be the disabled escort for these candidates, leading them around as I hobbled with my cane. Why they chose me for this task instead of a receptionist, security personnel, or even the hiring manager, I do not know, but I can only assume it was part of their effort to make things so unbearable for me that I left on my own accord. This is what I wrote to Bezos:

Dear Jeff,

I wanted to write you a quick note and thank you for taking the time and attention

from your day and your organization and assigning an investigator to the matters and concerns that I had raised to your personal attention. HR employment attorney Anne DeCleene was very prompt in her follow up and from the onset she worked diligently towards meeting her SLA commitment of providing a response within two weeks. As I have been assured that she has informed you of her results of her investigation I would like to respectfully disagree with her conclusions. Having said the above even though I disagree with her conclusions based on your Amazon Leadership Principles, I have a reinforced strong backbone. I disagree, yet commit fully to AWS and Amazon. I am looking forward to my conversations with Senior HR Manager L— on how I can best contribute to Amazon.

Wishing you a wonderful Sunday.

Sincerely,

Vahid Razavi

Senior Alliances Manager

Christmas in February, Or, A Critical Overview of Amazon Leadership Principles

I'd like to dive deeper (that's actually Principle 12) into Amazon's leadership principles, or at least the ones that I've given the most thought to. The one that really grinds my gears is Principle 13, "have backbone; disagree and commit." I wasn't kidding when I wrote to Jeff that "I have a reinforced strong backbone" and I've got the X-rays to show it — I'll be setting off security alarms for the rest of my life with the amount of metal I've got holding my insides together. Now, while having a "disagree and commit" principle which emboldens and enables each Amazonian to speak what's on their mind, even if it means pissing other people off and heated arguments, is a theoretically admirable principle. But life isn't like a sitcom in which issues are resolved in 22 minutes. The "backbone" principle doesn't mean you're not going to step on any toes, hurt any feelings, or run afoul of your bosses. I've also yet to determine exactly what "backbone" stands for and what kind of standards it upholds. It seems to me (and plenty of other observers), that there isn't any business Amazon won't pursue due to unethical or even criminal practices, as its partnership with the rendition-as-a-service provider DXC proved. I don't think Amazon has got much backbone. Cartilage, perhaps, but backbone, not so much.

This brings us to Principle 6, “insist on the highest standards.” Anyone who’s read this far into this book probably laughed at that one, given Amazon’s willingness to do business with some of the world’s worse human rights violators, to say nothing of the way it treats the “least” of its workforce. Amazon explains that its high standards principle means, in part, that “leaders ensure that defects do not get sent down the line and that problems are fixed so they stay fixed.” To me this completely overlooks the workers who are paid poverty wages to avoid defects and fix problems to the point where the worker becomes the defect, the problem to be fixed; and we’ve seen how Amazon goes about this.

Principle 11, “earn the trust of others,” becomes something of a mission impossible in such a work environment. How can fulfillment workers ever trust bosses who work them so hard for so little and who literally monitor every move of their hands with tracking devices? How can mid-level Amazonians trust a management that pays for a new company-wide \$15 minimum wage by slashing their benefits? How can conscientious consumers or investors trust a behemoth that’s ruthlessly crushed its competition and demonstrated a willingness to work with even those who fly people to secret torture prisons?

Principle 9, “frugality,” is the genesis of countless water cooler jokes among Amazonians. “We try not to spend money on things that don’t matter to customers,” Amazon explains. But the company may as well just give a big middle finger to those who matter most to its successful operation: its workers. Amazon isn’t just frugal, it’s downright *cheap*. Would you believe me if I told you they hold their “holiday party” in February? Well they do, and I’m not talking about Presidents’ or Valentines Day, or Black History Month either.

I really couldn’t shake the feeling that I was working for a modern-day Ebenezer Scrooge, but even the brilliant mind and pen of Charles Dickens couldn’t imagine that the richest man in the world would scrooge his overworked employees out of a proper holiday party and then have the “backbone” to double down by throwing them a lame event in February instead!

Cape Cod, for example, is a lovely — though really expensive — place to spend a delightful summer holiday. But would you go there in the winter, when the weather is freezing, wet, and miserable, just to save money? Of course not.

In addition to being stingy on employee niceties, Amazon is also cheap on social responsibility and on its own responsibility to pay its fair share of taxes. I don't often agree with President Trump but he was absolutely right when he tweeted about Amazon's tax avoidance. The company pays almost no federal tax despite being worth over a trillion dollars at the time of this writing. According to the Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy (ITEP), a non-partisan, non-profit think tank, Amazon, which reported \$5.6 billion in annual profit and reaped a \$789 million windfall from the newly-enacted Republican tax reform (read bottom-up redistribution) law, didn't pay a dime of federal income tax in 2017. Furthermore, ITEP says that during the previous five years, Amazon reported US profits of \$8.2 billion, yet paid an effective federal income tax rate of just 11.4 percent.³¹ Then there's the issue of Amazon's demands on the as-yet undetermined city that will be home to the company's controversial HQ2 (second headquarters) project, which Bezos says will bring \$5 billion in investment and 50,000 new high-paying jobs to the lucky winner.³² We don't know exactly what all of these demands are because Amazon forced the 20 finalists to sign non-disclosure agreements, but we do know that whenever 238 municipalities compete to offer the most enticing package, the results can be nothing but a race to the bottom with one big winner — Amazon. It will surely get its second headquarters on the cheap, most likely with plenty of tax breaks and other incentives. We know that Newark, New Jersey offered \$7 billion in city and state tax credits, while Grand Rapids, Michigan — which didn't even make it into the round of 20 finalists — offered \$2 billion in incentives.³³ Asking municipalities to fund and subsidize private corporations' costs is really unfair to the people who live and pay taxes there. It takes desperately needed funding away from essential public services in a time of never-ending budget cuts. It diverts money that could be spent fixing schools and infrastructure, or on social programs, housing, libraries, community centers, and other projects that enhance the places we live and not just corporations' bottom lines.

The final Amazon leadership principle I'd like to discuss is the very first one the company thought of — customer obsession. Amazon is obsessed with its customers to a fault. It pursues this policy even when it means tarnishing its own brand, as was the case with DXC and its rendition flights.

Sometimes Amazon doesn't even operate by its principles but rather by what I've described as an elaborate screen of metaphorical smoke and mirrors. While I was at Amazon I was responsible for summarizing the "Win Reports" for my attorney-turned-manager to highlight group wins with our partners. I found the process very subjective and anything but analytical. As a business we actually had no idea how they influenced revenues, but I was nonetheless asked to insert data and deal sizes without any actual numbers to back it all up. It was all made up. I told a manager, as well as my own boss who reported directly to the GM, that I felt uncomfortable reporting these bogus numbers and wins, especially since I would have to use them as the source in my report. Of course, my boss did not want to be on the hook for fake numbers and refused to be referenced in the report. We ended the conversation in disagreement. Later that day the stress proved too much and I broke down and wrote a personal advertisement I intended to publish in the *Palo Alto Daily News* stating that I am the fool who works for Jeff Bezos. The ad never ran; the publisher was too worried about drawing the litigious ire of such a giant as Amazon. I took that afternoon off and checked myself into Stanford Hospital emergency room. I was diagnosed with work-related stress and discharged at two in the morning. I called in sick the next day.

I then wrote to Jeff Bezos for the fourth and final time. I reminded him of the time that I was running WarrantyNow back in the dot.com boom. His team on Amazon's retail side had refused to meet with my company because one of our partners had used an Amazon logo on a UPS box for advertisement without our knowledge. Amazon felt that had been a violation of their trademark; therefore, they wouldn't consider us as a vendor. I sent Jeff an invitation to meet to discuss this over tea. I wanted to discuss how I got screwed over, how I'd lost my brand, and now how CSC's new iteration, DXC, was doing business with AWS. I had previously met with AWS's CEO and thought that after reading Jeff's response to that infamous *New York Times* article, he would really like to know what the hell was going on in his company. But I was proven wrong.

In that August 2015 article, the *Times*' Jodi Kantor and David Streitfield opened a window on a world in which Amazon employees — they're called Amazonians in company parlance — are subjected to a pressure-cooker environment of overwork and blistering criticism. The article told of emails sent by supervisors at midnight, followed up with text messages asking why the email wasn't

answered. Snitching on colleagues via covert communication with bosses is also encouraged. Workers suffering from cancer, miscarriages, and other afflictions and crises said they were evaluated unfairly or pushed aside. One former Amazon human resources director referred to employees who left the company or were terminated in annual culls as victims of “purposeful Darwinism.” A former Amazon book marketer said seeing people weep while working was a regular occurrence: “Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk,” he recalled. While some employees said the workplace culture at Amazon helped them reach heights they previously thought were unattainable, others felt attacked by a management style that encourages fierce, sometimes painful, criticism of others’ ideas and actions. “If you’re a good Amazonian, you become an Amabot,” one employee told the *Times*.³⁴

Another Breakdown

Unfortunately, due to the incessant work stress, my mania came roaring back. I grew fearful of my work computer and digital devices. At 8:00 a.m. on May 11, 2017 I went to Amazon’s San Francisco office to turn in my laptop, as I strongly felt that my boss was monitoring my online activities. I was also certain that I had been followed by Amazon security personnel when I was in the Palo Alto office talking to my boss the previous Tuesday.

Thursday morning as I was trying to return the Amazon hardware, I was picked up outside the office by San Francisco police officers and taken to Dignity Health Saint Francis Memorial Hospital for mental evaluation. At Dignity I repeatedly requested a transfer to Stanford Hospital so I could see my own doctors. Besides, it had been less than three days since I’d been released from Stanford. Dignity Health refused my every request. It was a strange hospital ward; I felt so uncomfortable and harassed. I was chased by other patients. I was locked alone in a room that had anti-Donald Trump graffiti on the nurse’s bulletin board. When I could get out of that room I would push my walker up and down the long hallways for hours on end, going out of my mind (or even more out of my mind than I already was) and trying to find a way out of that Orwellian-named hellhole. The nurse assistants seemed to me to be the only sane people in the whole damned psych ward. I didn’t trust my doctors, or even my nurses. Why should I when they wouldn’t grant my transfer to Stanford

Hospital? The food sucked. It was much better in the Serbian mental institution. There you'd get these wonderful Serbian dishes, like burek for breakfast, rich stews or plump, juicy sausages with hearty potatoes for lunch, and delicacies like *karadžorđeva šnicla* — known as the “maiden's dream” owing to its somewhat phallic resemblance — for dinner. It was really choice fare they fed me in Belgrade, and I waxed nostalgically grateful to my caretakers there once faced with the soulless sustenance served up at Dignity “Health.”

I was transferred without my consent to the inpatient psychiatric ward, where I was initially held on a 5150 — California legal code for the temporary, involuntary psychiatric commitment of individuals who present a danger to themselves or others due to signs of mental illness. This was followed by a 5250, which permits involuntary commitment for up to two weeks; I was held for nearly 14 days. Dignity Health is the eighth-largest medical care provider in the United States, yet when it comes to the psych ward, they provide neither much dignity nor much health to their patients, based on my personal experience there. I've never been in a hospital room tagged with graffiti before. What's more, the patient handbook and privacy policy had not been updated for decades and was dated 2002. I asked the doctors to remove the writing from the walls as I found the presence of graffiti to be offensive, repugnant, and utterly incongruous with what one imagines a hospital experience should be; I suspect my placement in that particular room was meant to provoke a negative reaction from me.

On my last day in the psych ward, the graffiti was removed.

After finally getting discharged from Dignity Health I immediately went back to AWS offices and turned in my computers and my USB sticks. The following week I checked myself into Stanford University psychiatric ward for further evaluation. During that time period Amazon surprisingly approved my long-term medical leave. The reason they gave for the approval was the same rationale they'd previously cited to deny me benefits: psychological disability. I was now approved for long-term leave, but only for two years. My last operation was November 29, 2017. I talked to my Stanford doctors and they did not believe it was in my best interest, healthwise, to work in such a stressful, backstabbing environment as I suffered through at AWS.

“You Knew What I Was When You Picked Me Up”

I suppose I should have known better from the start. It’s not like Amazon’s myriad crimes and misdeeds weren’t well known — and not just among activist circles either. The old legend of the boy and the snake comes to mind:

A little boy was walking down a mountain path, where he came upon a rattlesnake. The serpent had grown very old and asked if the boy would carry him to the mountaintop so he could behold one last sunset before he died.

“No, Mr. Rattlesnake,” the boy respectfully but warily replied. “If I pick you up, you will bite me and I will die.”

The rattlesnake promised not to bite the boy, and so he cautiously picked it up and carried it to the top of the mountain. There, they watched the sunset together and it was beautiful. The snake then asked the boy to take it home and he carefully carried it down the mountain, stopping at his own home on the way where he gave the old snake food, water, and a place to sleep. In the morning, they awoke and the boy picked up the snake to carry it back to its own home where it would die. When they arrived at the old snake’s home, the boy began to set it down when it suddenly reared back and bit him.

“Why did you do that?” the boy shrieked in pain and shock. “Now I will surely die.”

To which the old snake slyly retorted, “You knew what I was when you picked me up.”

I certainly knew what Amazon was when I “picked it up.” I was aware of some of its egregious corporate practices before I was hired and although I found them disheartening, I’ll confess I turned a blind eye because I needed a job. But, in my defense, this was before many of Amazon’s worst misdeeds had occurred and been revealed; I had no way of knowing about these practices during my days at AWS. It’s long been known that the company’s more than 15,000 “fulfillment center” employees are pushed to and beyond the limit with grueling conditions and hours. That’s “fulfillment” for customers, definitely not the workers: the men and women who toil away in giant, soulless warehouses where speed and efficiency are the name of the game, as Bezos tries to squeeze out every penny of profit while filling customer orders as quickly and cheaply as possible.

In 2011 the *Allentown Morning Call* reported that Amazon workers in a Pennsylvania warehouse were forced to work mandatory overtime in insufferable working conditions, including 100-degree summer heat. Pushed to a pace many couldn't maintain, numerous warehouse workers collapsed from heat exhaustion. The problem was so acute that Amazon arranged to have paramedics parked outside the warehouse during the hot summer months so that they could treat workers suffering from dehydration and heat exhaustion. One former worker said he saw multiple colleagues passing out at work or being brought out in wheelchairs and stretchers by paramedics. "I never felt like passing out in a warehouse and I never felt treated like a piece of crap in any other warehouse but this one," he told the *Morning Call*. "They can do that because there aren't any jobs in the area." He's right; once a booming mining and manufacturing region, the area, like much of Rust Belt America, has been in decline for decades — as Billy Joel immortalized in his 1980 hit "Allentown."

The *Morning Call* interviewed 20 current and former workers at the Lehigh Valley warehouse; only one said it was a good place to work. The others described being dangerously overworked in scorching summer temperatures, frequent reprimands over their productivity, and constant threats of termination. Workers who were fired were unceremoniously marched out of the facility, a terrifying reminder to their colleagues to pick up the pace, "make rate" (Amazon-speak for working fast enough), and don't complain — or else. All of this for an \$11 or \$12/hour gig that doesn't even cover the basic life necessities for each worker, let alone their families. Still, many Amazon warehouse workers had no choice but to keep at it. "I just kept pushing myself," former employee Karen Salasky told the *Morning Call*. "They asked me why my rates were dropping [in the summer heat], and I said, 'My rates are dropping because it's hot and I have asthma.'" Salasky said she would often cry herself to sleep at night, and that she and her colleagues would often sarcastically chant, "end slavery at Amazon."

On one hot June day Salasky's body felt numb and her fingers started tingling. She was taken in a wheelchair to an air-conditioned office where she was examined by paramedics — and questioned by Amazon management. "I was really upset and I said, 'All you people care about is the rates, not the well-being of the people,'" she said. "I've never worked for an employer that had paramedics waiting outside for people to drop because of the extreme heat."³⁵

Worked to Death

Sometimes the problem is much worse than heat exhaustion. At least seven workers have died while working in Amazon warehouses since 2013, landing the company on the National Council for Occupational Safety and Health's "Dirty Dozen" list. Of the seven people who died, two were crushed by forklifts, two were struck or run over by trucks, one suffered a fatal heart-related incident while working an overnight shift, one was dragged and crushed by a conveyor belt, and one was crushed to death by a pallet loader.³⁶ After one of the two forklift deaths (that of 59-year-old Phillip Terry, who worked in a Plainfield, Indiana fulfillment center), the state labor department proposed fines totaling a whopping \$28,000 — or about as much money as Bezos earns in around 12 minutes. That's not even a slap on the wrist; it's more like a not-so-strongly-worded lip service reprimand at best. This despite a nine-page letter from the Indiana Department of Labor accusing Amazon of four violations, including failure to provide adequate training to employees and failure to follow safety procedures.³⁷

It's not just in the United States where Amazon workers are being used and abused. In fact, the company's employees in Europe, where labor rights and protections are much stronger than in the US, have staged numerous high-profile protests in recent years. In Germany, Poland, and Spain, workers went on strike or launched protest movements against Amazon in the summer of 2018. German workers demanded healthier working conditions.³⁸ In Spain, protesters were attacked by National Police officers — this under a new "socialist" government. What kind of socialists sic thugs on workers peacefully fighting for their rights?

Despite the police brutality and threats of reprisals, Amazon workers are increasingly demanding to be treated with fairness, dignity, and respect. In Britain, investigative journalist James Bloodworth went undercover for six months to expose horrid working conditions in which super-rushed employees were forced to urinate in bottles or forego bathroom breaks entirely in order to keep up. The British worker advocacy group Organise surveyed Amazon employees and found that three quarters avoid using the restroom for fear of missing quotas, with more than half of the workers reporting suffering from job-related depression. Fully 80 percent said they would not apply for a job

at Amazon again given their experience there. Bloodworth painted a vivid picture of an underpaid, overworked workforce living in fear of discipline or dismissal for failing to keep up with the break-neck pace of customer orders.³⁹ In this case, “break-neck” isn’t just a figure of speech — a July 2018 *Guardian* investigation found numerous cases of Amazon workers left to suffer after warehouse injuries that sometimes even drove some to homelessness. The median Amazon employee’s salary was \$28,446 in 2017. Bezos earns that much every nine seconds. With a net worth now exceeding \$150 billion, he is the richest person in the history of people.⁴⁰ Yet Vickie Shannon Allen, a 49-year-old Amazon warehouse worker in Haslet, Texas, is, as of time of writing, living in her car after she injured her back while counting goods on a workstation that was missing a key piece of safety equipment. Allen was offered a paltry \$3,500 buyout which came with a non-disclosure agreement. She refused because she did not want to lose her right to speak out publicly against Amazon. “They cost me my home, they screwed me over and over, and I go days without eating,” Allen lamented.⁴¹

The abuse continues. Ill workers, including those with doctor’s notes, have been ignored and disciplined, or terminated for “no call, no show.” In its bid for total worker control, Amazon has even patented a wristband that tracks warehouse workers’ arm movements and can vibrate to point hands in the “right” direction, adding yet another layer of surveillance to an already over-monitored and over-stressed workplace.⁴² Amazon says the wristbands are but the latest innovation in service of ever-faster customer fulfillment. That is, of course, until robotic hands replace human ones in Amazon’s 140-plus warehouses and, eventually, pretty much everywhere else too. It’s not just in the warehouses, either. The company’s office workers are subjected to management data and psychological tools designed to spur Amazonians to produce more and more. “The company is running a continual performance improvement algorithm on its staff,” a former Kindle marketer told the *New York Times*.⁴³ The problem extends even beyond Amazon itself to the companies it has acquired, most notably Whole Foods and the *Washington Post*.

Like many big businesses, Amazon is no fan of labor unions — but many Whole Foods employees are. Recently a group of calling themselves the Whole Foods Cross Regional Committee has spearheaded an effort to unionize company workers. They sent an email to employees at most of the

490 Whole Foods stores decrying a workforce in crisis, with workers living in fear of imminent layoffs in the wake of Amazon's acquisition. Echoing other workers' movements, including the successful #FightFor15 campaign, the email called for improvements, including a \$15 hourly minimum wage, more affordable health insurance, paid parental leave, 401k matching, and more.⁴⁴ Amazon responded to the email by almost immediately producing and circulating an anti-union training video among Whole Foods team leaders. In typical anti-union language heard countless times over the past century and a half of labor struggle and management repression, the video posits that:

We do not believe unions are in the best interest of our customers, our shareholders, or most importantly, our associates. Our business model is built upon speed, innovation, and customer obsession—things that are generally not associated with union. When we lose sight of those critical focus areas we jeopardize everyone's job security: yours, mine, and the associates'...

You would never threaten to close your building just because associates joined a union. But you might need to talk about how having a union could hurt innovation, which could hurt customer obsession, which could ultimately threaten the building's continued existence.

The video goes on to identify “warning signs... that can indicate associate disengagement, vulnerability to organizing, or early organizing activity.” These red flags include using words like “living wage” and “steward,” distribution of pamphlets or fliers, employees discussing their concerns with co-workers, wearing pro-union clothing or accessories, increased workplace negativity, behavior that’s “out of character,” workers “who normally aren’t connected to each other suddenly hanging out together,” and employees showing an “unusual interest in policies, benefits, employee lists, or other company information.”⁴⁵

These anti-union efforts do work. In 2014, a small group of maintenance and repair technicians at Amazon's Middletown, Delaware warehouse voted 21-6 against unionizing after intense pressure from managers and anti-union consultants hired by Amazon to suppress the unionization effort. Sometimes the repression is anything but subtle. In 2000 the Communications Workers of America launched a campaign to unionize 400 Amazon customer service employees. Amazon retaliated by

simply closing the call center where they worked as part of wider cuts during the dot-com bust shortly after the turn of the century.⁴⁶

In 2013 Amazon purchased the venerable *Washington Post* for \$250 million. Bezos' management team then proceeded to freeze defined-benefit pensions for non-union employees and attempt to eliminate health insurance benefits for part-time workers. Frederick Kunkle, a *Post* staff reporter and co-chair of the Washington-Baltimore News Guild's collective bargaining arm, wrote an op-ed criticizing Bezos for contemplating future philanthropic endeavors more than the welfare of his workers. "As with other multi-billionaires, Bezos should remember that his vast wealth came in part from labor, and he should do more to share that wealth with workers," Kunkle wrote. "Instead, Bezos has shown that he views his employees as parts in a high-tech machine, that income inequality is someone else's problem, and that modern corporations owe little more to their employees than a paycheck."⁴⁷ The *Post*, of course, declined to publish Kunkle's critique, so he published it for free on Huffington Post. He was subsequently warned in writing about "freelancing for a competing publication without permission." According to the Office of General Counsel of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), this discipline broke the law because Kunkle received no payment for his article. NLRB also stated that since nothing in the piece was untrue or disparaging it could not be kept from the public, nor should its author face retribution.⁴⁸ As both Kunkle and I learned the hard way, challenging or even criticizing Jeff Bezos, one of the richest and most powerful people on the planet, is fraught with peril. But Kunkle remained undaunted, telling *In These Times* that he held hope that "Jeff Bezos might wake up to the idea one of these days that he owes more to society and his employees than the minimum he can get away with."⁴⁹

I was aware of many of AWS's problems, but hey, a man's gotta eat. In the end I chose the rather substantial paycheck AWS was offering me. I may have chosen to dance with the demi-devil but that was then, this is now, and now is the time for me to turn the tables on Amazon.

Turning the Tables On Amazon

It was one of those "summer" mornings in San Francisco that give credence to the old local saying,

often misattributed to that illustrious early resident Mark Twain, that “the coldest winter I ever felt was a summer in San Francisco.” As I made my way from my car to the government building in the gritty Tenderloin, Karl the Fog’s wet, wispy fingers caressed my face as if to soothe my frayed nerves ahead of what was to come. What was to come was my Amazon unemployment benefits hearing and, I presumed, another meting out of what passes for justice in a nation whose highest court has ruled that corporations are people, but that people do not have any right to life-saving health care. In other words, I wasn’t expecting much justice being that the United States has largely once again become a corporatocracy ruled primarily by and for corporate and elite interests. You could say that despite the weather, I wasn’t exactly cool as a cucumber when I entered the court building, although I was certainly as gloomy. My mood did not improve when the judge who would be reviewing my appeal informed me I could not (as guaranteed under law) bring my note taker into the courtroom with me. I asserted my legal right to reasonable accommodation for my disability and the judge let him sit in with us. The judge, a soft-spoken, kindly, but firm woman clearly saw that I was a bit of a nervous mess as I presented my supporting evidence. She told me to “take it down a notch” and reminded me that she might actually find in my favor. Which she did, I was happy — and a bit surprised — to discover. I’d won a battle, but the war continues.

I was awarded a whopping \$1,350 for my troubles. I thought that this sum, as nominal as it may be, would do more good for people who work for the well-being of the world than it would do for me. The Internet Archive is a San Francisco-based non-profit digital library whose stated mission is “universal access to all knowledge.” It does an amazing job of archiving the World Wide Web from its earliest days. You can look up just about anything on their Wayback Machine, from the front page of Yahoo’s directory on the day you were born (if you were born in 1995 or later) to deleted articles for research. There are scientific journals, old and out-of-print books, newspaper articles, and much more. What’s more, The Internet Archive is a front-line soldier in the fight for net neutrality and online privacy. It battles against NSA mass surveillance and dangerous bills like the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and the Preventing Real Online Threats to Economic Creativity and Theft of Intellectual Property Act (or PROTECT IP Act, a.k.a. PIPA) which amount to encroaching state tyranny. It hosts topical events like the Aaron Swartz International Hackathon to honor of the creator of Creative Commons, Reddit, RSS, and the technology behind SecureDrop. Facing 13 felony counts, a \$1 million fine, and 35 years in federal prison, all for downloading and publishing a

massive trove of academic articles from JSTOR, Swartz hung himself in his Brooklyn apartment on January 11, 2013 at the age of 26.

Freedom of the Press Foundation, also based in San Francisco, is a non-profit which supports public interest journalism with the notion that, as Pentagon Papers judge Murray Gurfein wrote, “a cantankerous press, an obstinate press, a ubiquitous press must be suffered by those in authority in order to preserve the even greater values of freedom of expression and the right of the people to know.” Freedom of the Press Foundation is a safe haven and tireless advocate for whistleblowers, who are often treated as worse criminals than the war and corporate criminals they expose. It helps independent journalists use and amplify their voices. They’ve done an incredible job of fighting for the interests of a free press.

Last, but not least, is my church. I thought I should share something with my immediate community in San Francisco, and as I attend Sunday mass every week at The Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples, I decided to invest there. When they say “all peoples,” they really mean it. Founded in 1944 by Dr. Howard Thurman and Dr. Alfred Fisk, the church was America’s first interracial interfaith congregation. On any given Sunday you’ll encounter people of various races, creeds, national origins, and religious views. One of the church’s main stated missions is “to find the common ground where each of us may share in the richness of our differences and partake in the fruits of the Spirit.” The congregation recites the following commitment at the close of each Sunday mass:

I affirm my need for a growing understanding of all people as children of God, and I seek after a vital experience of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and other great religious spirits whose fellowship with God was the foundation of their own fellowship with all people.

I desire to share in the spiritual growth and ethical awareness of people of varied national, cultural, racial, and creedal heritage united in a religious fellowship.

I desire the strength of corporate worship through membership in the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples with the imperative of personal dedication to the working

out of God's purpose here and in all places.

The presiding minister, the Rev. Dr. Dorsey O. Blake, is a soft-spoken man with an intense gaze whose sermons speak of an acute awareness of and connection to the struggles for social, economic, and spiritual justice around the world. I first met the good reverend while attending the Unitarian Universalist church, where he was giving a sermon on civil rights issues. I asked for his card and followed him to his church, which is much smaller but very diverse. It's also got better music, with Dr. Carl Blake directing and playing piano gloriously. When you're in the hospital, most people might send you a get-well card or some flowers. Not Rev. Blake. He went out of his way to come see me, and I'll never forget his graciousness in my greatest hour of need. There are times in everyone's life when they really need spiritual grounding, and that's exactly what Rev. Blake and the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples delivers.

On a recent Sunday Rev. Blake's sermon touched upon historical characters as varied as Thoreau and Marx. The common thread between them being that they are a group of enlightened historical — and current — figures who understood what Rev. Martin Luther King Jr (who Thurman mentored) called the obligation of decent human beings to resist systems and acts of inequity. Rev. Blake even had the audacity of spirit to remind us that the Declaration of Independence bestows upon We the People the sacred duty “to throw off” repressive government. Imagine what would happen if we tried that today! Blake cites church co-founder Howard Thurman perhaps more than anyone else, with the most recent sermon I attended being largely read from Thurman's meditative masterpiece, “How Good To Center Down”:

How good it is to center down!

To sit quietly and see one's self pass by!

The streets of our minds seethe with endless traffic;

Our spirits resound with clashings, with noisy silences,

*While something deep within hungers and thirsts for the still moment
and the resting lull.*

*With full intensity we seek, ere the quiet passes, a fresh sense
of order in our living;*

*A direction, a strong sure purpose that will structure our confusion
and bring meaning in our chaos.*

*We look at ourselves in this waiting moment —
the kinds of people we are.*

*The questions persist: what are we doing with our lives? —
what are the motives that order our days?*

What is the end of our doings?

Where are we trying to go?

Where do we put the emphasis and where are our values focused?

For what end do we make sacrifices?

Where is my treasure and what do I love most in life?

What do I hate most in life and to what am I true?

Over and over the questions beat in upon the waiting moment.

*As we listen, floating up through all the jangling echoes of our turbulence,
there is a sound of another kind —*

A deeper note which only the stillness of the heart makes clear.

It moves directly to the core of our being.

Our questions are answered,

Our spirits refreshed, and we move back into the traffic of our daily round

With the peace of the Eternal in our step.

How good it is to center down!

“Don’t ask what the world needs,” Thurman said. “Ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” For me, coming alive meant considering launching and growing Ethics In Tech as an effective non-profit that speaks truth to corporate power and fights for all of our rights.

Ethics In Tech: An Activist Reborn

I wouldn't have to look very hard to find Ethics In Tech's first target. Amazon has its pick of business partners. It is the industry leader and has a global consumer and a business brand. Why they would want to partner with the worst assholes of the tech industry that had committed crimes against humanity is beyond my understanding. If I am denied working at my own startup over fears of intellectual property theft, and if I am denied employment based on McCarthyesque efforts to stifle my freedom of expression, then I was left with only one choice: look deep into my roots and values and think about the possibility of restarting Ethics in Technology as a non-profit organization. In theory, I could run Ethics in Tech as a non-profit focused on five areas of public interest. These are:

- Equality in tech
- Employee-employer labor relations issues in the tech sector
- Environment, specifically the environmental impact of technology development
- Privacy and privacy rights — How technology can empower or hinder our personal freedoms in the digital age
- Artificial Intelligence — The impact of AI on human evolution and development

I believe that these five areas require special attention in the tech community. I have worked on the business end of the tech sector for over 20 years. I am Iranian-American and a very proud citizen of both countries. Over the coming years and decades the decisions that tech companies make every day will impact us all. My goal is to bring the voice of the masses to the tech community by organizing a dialogue through events, content, and all available social and press tools to create awareness and drive public policy. Certain acts do not belong in the tech community. Rendition and torture are not part of the service offerings of most tech companies. The ones that do choose to profit from these kinds of crimes and other cold-blooded business practices need to be named and shamed — and believe me, I've done plenty of both.

Luckily for me, I've been an activist for most of my life. Back in the 1970s when I was just a little

boy, my father would set me atop a stroller and take me with him to protests against the brutal monarch, the Shah. The Shah's family had ruled with an iron fist for decades thanks to the staunch support of successive US administrations and the CIA. It's always funny to me when I hear American leaders talking about the need for democracy in Iran. Well, Iran had a democracy once, and it was great until the US destroyed it. Back in 1951 the people of Iran, perhaps taking President Harry S. Truman's promise to "assist free people to work out their own destinies in their own way," elected Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh as their new prime minister. Mossadegh won the hearts of his people by fighting to end Western exploitation of Iran's oil and other vast natural wealth. He nationalized Anglo-Iranian Oil (known today as BP) and kicked out a bunch of British technicians while severing diplomatic ties with London. Mossadegh was the most popular leader Iranians have ever known. Time magazine even named him Man of the Year in 1951, calling him the "Iranian George Washington."

Britain, the United States, and other Western imperialist powers were shocked and infuriated, and it wasn't long before the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration was planning a CIA-orchestrated coup to depose Mossadegh. Operation Ajax was a wild success, with the Shah swiftly restored to his throne, where his family would rule for more than another quarter century. In order to help the Shah keep order, the CIA, working with Israel, created SAVAK, the notoriously brutal internal security force that specialized in horrific tortures, sometimes taught by the CIA. Five successive US presidents lavished the Shah with aid and friendship over the decades, with Jimmy Carter, the so-called "human rights president," fêting the dictator at a White House New Year's Eve soirée in 1978.⁵⁰

It was around this time that my dad was taking me to street protests in Tehran. Things were about to fall apart in Iran but to a small boy what I saw and learned was that people united in a righteous cause could force real change in the world. But there are things that are more important than even the most righteous cause, namely, the safety and well-being of one's family, and so my parents decided that the best thing for us to do was to leave our beloved homeland behind and seek refuge in the United States. I was eight years old. The first time we tried to leave Iran we went to Switzerland, where we were denied US visas. The second time I was in Germany, where I was able

to obtain a tourist visa to travel to the United States. Eventually I was able to attain legal US residency.

But before that I had a war to survive, and surviving it ensured that I would be vehemently opposed to any and all future wars. My mom was a nurse who served during the Iran-Iraq war. After the Islamic revolution, during the US Embassy occupation and hostage crisis, the administration of Jimmy Carter cozied up to Saddam Hussein in neighboring Iraq, encouraging him to invade Iran in a bid to destabilize and ultimately destroy the nascent Islamic Republic. What followed was a horrific eight-year war of attrition that claimed well over a million lives. My mother was a chemical warfare nurse. One of the more grotesque chapters of the war involved Iraqi use of weapons of mass destruction. You may remember the famous photo of Donald Rumsfeld shaking hands with Saddam Hussein in Baghdad back in the early 1980s. The Reagan administration had just removed the Iraqi dictator from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. This move opened the door for greater co-operation between the US and Iraqi militaries, as well as for greater trade and investment opportunities.

It was during this period that the Iraqi regime began acquiring components from US and other Western corporations that it used to build its chemical arsenal. This arsenal would include the deadly neurotoxins Taub and Sarin, as well as mustard gas. These weapons had been internationally banned for generations. They were too horrific even for Hitler, who experienced their ghastly effects as a young soldier in the trenches of World War I. But the US and other Western nations turned a blind eye as Saddam's forces unleashed these weapons of mass destruction against not only Iranian troops and civilians, but against his own restive Kurdish population. In the most infamous of these attacks, some 2,000 Kurds were massacred at Halabja on March 16, 1988. The Iraqi army spared no one from its godawful WMDs; even hospitals and medical facilities were targeted. Around 20,000 Iranian troops and medical personnel were killed by Iraqi chemical weapons.

My mother volunteered to put her life on the line to try to save others. I remember she would return from the front with "gifts" of shrapnel, bullets, and other macabre *souvenirs de guerre*. I would make collages out of them and bring them to school for show-and-tell. There was initially a certain

adventure to growing up during a war, but there was also a lot of hardship. Iraq targeted our population centers and everyone knew someone who'd been killed or wounded in the war, or who had come back never to be the same again due to the ravages of post-traumatic stress disorder. There were missile strikes and funerals and a general sense of terror. Saddam's Scud missiles weren't very accurate, but if enough of them are lobbed at a densely-populated city like Tehran it isn't long before one of them hits something. Or someone... maybe you or somebody you love. The adventure quickly passed.

Growing up during a war sucks. It's probably the reason why I'm against all wars to this very day. I'll never forget going to the hospital where my mother cared for chemical weapon victims and hearing the screams of men suffering in incomprehensible agony as their lungs burned from mustard gas and other neurotoxins. As I grew from a child into a teenager, this insanely bloody war dragged interminably on and on. It eventually ground into a lengthy stalemate spanning most of the 1980s before both sides came to their senses and put an end to the madness in 1988.

I may have left my country, but I've never stopped loving it. I've never stopped being Iranian. My country had leaped from the frying pan into the fire by exchanging one authoritarian regime for another. As is the case in so many revolutions throughout history, what began with the best of intentions to uplift society and bring liberty and prosperity to an oppressed people quickly turned into something much uglier. Anyone who's read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* or listened to the band The Who could have predicted this.

...Meet the new boss, same as the old boss...

The Iranian people have a nearly 10,000-year history. The current regime, and even the era of the Shah, are but hiccups on the timeline of our history, and will, in their time, pass from the scene like so many other despots before them. But I'll always be Iranian, and proud.

I also never stopped being an activist after I left Iran. Quite the contrary. After all, we immigrated to the San Francisco Bay Area, which everyone knows is America's foremost hotbed of liberal politics

and activism. I was the guy with peace buttons on his backpack in high school, railing against nuclear proliferation, or apartheid in South Africa, or pretty much anything Ronald Reagan did. Later, I protested against the first Gulf War, the second Iraq war, the third — how many Iraq wars have there now been? I protested all the US wars, especially after 9/11, starting with the never-ending war in Afghanistan that's claimed so much blood and treasure with no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. How can you not be against this? When you think that a fully-grown 21-year-old adult today has no memories of a time when this country was not at war, that really puts it all in perspective. Indeed, for 238 of the 242 years of its existence, the United States has attacked, invaded, or occupied other nations. But I digress.

My activist background made starting Ethics In Tech relatively easy. In an age when our rights are under constant attack and when powerful tech companies, as well as government, can run roughshod over those rights, it's not hard to find a receptive audience hungry for the chance to affect positive meaningful change. EIT aims to do much more than just raise awareness and call out bad actors in the tech industry. Yes, we firmly believe that sunlight is the best disinfectant; naming and shaming companies like CSC and AWS is extremely important. But affecting systemic change requires participation in the political process, as rigged as it may be. To that end we seek to find progressive political candidates from not only the two traditional parties, but also from third or no party at all who will stand up to defend our constitutional rights, not just the rights of corporations to do as they please. Is there anyone out there in their right mind who really thinks it's a normal state of affairs in a democracy that corporations are constitutionally regarded as "people" with "free speech rights"? That they should be allowed to spend as much money as they please to influence the outcome of our elections while the same Supreme Court refuses to recognize health care as a basic human right (to which all Americans should have equal access)? In the age of Citizens United, only united citizens can restore sanity to a system gone mad. EIT will drive the candidates and campaigns that can do this.

Strong results require strong partnerships. To that end, Ethics In Tech seeks to work with organizations big and small to tackle the issues and injustices that affect our common welfare. Being that employer-employee relations is one of the five key areas on which our group focuses, we are fellow travelers with organizations composed of whistleblowers and former tech company

employees. Well-known national and even international rights groups like the indispensable American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Freedom of the Press Foundation, more tech-specific groups like Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and the Internet Archive are also fellow travelers. We can help them raise awareness and funding for various projects they have that reflect our mutual commitment to ethics in technology.

Successful campaigns for change often require thinking outside of the box. One thing I've learned observing the US political scene these past couple of decades is that it's much easier to win people over to your opinion if you can make them laugh. Nobody wants to be browbeaten by a loudmouth on a soapbox, but if you can make people laugh — even at the most outrageous or absurd crimes — you've got a chance to win them over. The late, great George Carlin knew it decades ago when he nailed who's really in charge of America in his bit "The Owners of the Country," which ends with the infamous punchline that "it's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it." Jon Stewart, Chris Rock and Michelle Wolf know it. And I knew it too when I came up with the idea for NSA Comedy Tour back when illegal government surveillance, aided and abetted by some of the nation's biggest tech and telecom firms, was still making national headlines. It was a short-lived but successful tour, with over 150 people at each of our three events. We had around half a dozen comedians including Will Durst and Nato Green, as well as an expert panel that took a more serious look at some of the most pressing ethics in tech issues of the day. The audience was also treated to performances by Mike Rufo who has written lots of political songs, including "Spyin' Eyes," a hilarious Eagles-based parody about the not very amusing topic of government mass surveillance. Mike's not primarily into parodies; he's a serious singer, songwriter, and guitarist — and one hell of an activist to boot. But for better or worse, "Spyin' Eyes" is the Mike Rufo song most activists know, and he brought down the house when he played it at one of my NSA Comedy events. I'm quite keen on reviving NSA Comedy, perhaps with a roast of ethics in tech and some of the more notorious tech companies. We might have to do this outside of the United States given the current xenophobic stance of the Trump administration as demonstrated by the mostly-Muslim travel ban.

The Five Areas of Ethics In Tech

1- Equality in Tech

It's no secret that the technology industry has a racial and gender equality problem, or that there's a digital divide in the United States every bit as wide as the gap between rich and poor people. And while all levels of government — federal, state, and local — have acknowledged and are taking steps to address the former, and tech companies recognize and are tackling the latter, there is still a tremendous amount of work left to be done. Much has been made of the “bro culture” that has for so long pervaded Silicon Valley. Documentaries and books like Emily Chang's *Brotopia*, an exposé of Silicon Valley sexism replete with salacious depictions of Valley sex parties, have gotten plenty of attention in recent years, and for good reason. And just as the world is gaining glimpses into a microcosm where “business” might include pitching investors in a hot tub, along comes the #MeToo movement and a societal shift in tolerance and expectations. Unfortunately, according to data compiled by virtual event solutions company Evia, women — who make up more than half of the US workforce — occupy less than 20 percent of all tech jobs. What's worse, women today hold a smaller share of computer sciences jobs than they did in the 1980s.⁵¹ One of the reasons for this is, ironically, tech itself — the share of women in computer sciences plateaued around 1984 and the subsequent decline occurred at a time when more and more homes were getting personal computers. A narrative that computers are for boys was established, reinforced by product development and marketing aimed mostly at men and boys. This all informed and nurtured the burgeoning techie culture. Today, surveys have shown that girls become interested in tech careers at age 11 but soon thereafter lose interest. Experts say a lack of tech education, lack of female mentors, and general gender inequality are to blame. As in so many other areas, education is the key to tackling disparities. Nonprofit organizations like Girls Who Code and TechGirlz are working hard to close the gender gap in technology by targeting girls at a young age. The results have been promising — Girls Who Code founder Reshma Saujani claims we're on track to achieve gender parity in computer sciences by 2027. Of course there's a lot more to it than just gender equality. Women in tech endure situations and even dangers that no man in the industry ever faced. In addition to discussing her company's products and services, Bethanye Blount, who later co-founded and

became CEO of startup compensation platform Cathy Labs, found herself giving keynote speeches at tech conferences warning other women attendees to cover their drinks because sexual harassment and even assault were all too common at such events. Anita Sarkeesian, who launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of videos examining sexism in video gaming, received rape and death threats for her efforts.⁵² Focusing solely on gender pay and representation gaps often overlooks the daily trials and tribulations to which women in technology must endure.

Race, however, and not gender, remains the biggest obstacle to women when it comes to attaining executive and management positions in the tech industry. Ascend Foundation, a business organization that represents Asian Americans, analyzed data from the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for the San Francisco Bay Area and found that the racial gap in tech leadership positions between white men and minority men was larger than the gender gap between white men and white women. In 2015 white women were 31 percent more likely than Latino men to be executives, 88 percent more likely than Asian men, and 97 percent more likely than Black men.⁵³ While minorities, especially Blacks and Latinos, have made significant progress in penetrating the nation's tech industry, they are still shamefully underrepresented in computer and math jobs — Blacks occupied less than 8 percent of all computer and math positions and Latinos less than 7 percent, according to a 2018 Brookings Institution study. Recent trends don't look very promising; Black representation in science and math jobs has actually shrunk over the past decade.⁵⁴ I don't know what the stats are for Persian men, and I'm not the kind of guy who thinks there's a racial motivation behind every mistreatment or slight, but I'd also be blind if I didn't consider the role racial prejudice and bias may have played throughout my career.

Statistics and awareness are one thing; taking meaningful action to combat the problem is quite another. Ethics In Tech is a solutions-based endeavor, and the solution here starts with better education. Specifically, boosting computer, science, and math education starting as young as possible. We're not just talking about university-level courses — our country must dramatically expand exposure and access to entry-level tech skills as well. Computer sciences education should be more inclusive of girls and minorities; witness the success of coding programs and boot camps like Black Girls Code and #YesWeCode, and work-oriented skills programs like Year Up. Organizations including Byte Back and Per Scholas are stepping in to offer often overlooked entry-

level computer and IT certification courses. Tech companies have launched online certification courses as well. Ethics In Tech supports these programs and looks forward to making its own contributions to solving this persistent problem.

2- Employer-Employee Relations

Much of the problem with employer-employee relations stems from the way business owners and managers generally view their workers in the United States. Much of this country's labor history has been fraught with struggle as workers have fought for their rights, and Big Business has pushed back — often with deadly force. The days of mass casualty strikes and physically hostile bosses may be long over, but as many tech sector workers (especially those at the lower rungs of the economic ladder) can attest, there are plenty of lingering and new injustices today. There is so much work left to be done to improve the overall relationship between the titans of tech and what novelist Douglas Coupland called their “MicroSerfs.” I’ve traveled around the world and there’s no doubt that other countries are light-years ahead of the US in employee-employer relations. For contrast, I’d like to revisit the plight of those overworked and underpaid Amazon warehouse workers one more time. I really wonder: What sort of corporate board of executives gets together and comes up with policies like forbidding workers from sitting on the job, or giving them just one half-hour lunch break and two other 15-minute breaks over the course of their 10-hour shift? What kind of “human resource” should be expected to pack more than 1,200 items per day? Who decided it was ethical to force mandatory overtime shifts on workers and punish those who refuse by docking vacation time?⁵¹

To me it feels like many of the biggest tech players, the ones that attract the best and brightest recruits, are dangling shiny objects before their workers as part of a concerted effort to propagate what I call the work-life balance myth. Tech firms might let you bring your Maltipoo to work, they might have a kick-ass video game arcade or pool tables or climbing wall, their cafeterias might serve to-die-for sushi or quinoa bowls, but there’s no such thing as a free lunch. Can you really call it a “work-life balance” if you’re working 50-60 hours a week and have to sit in traffic or commute for another 10 hours each week? Can you really maximize worker happiness when employees are

treated like cattle, constantly monitored from badge in to badge out, and security patrols are everywhere? Treatment is even worse for the low-wage — usually subcontracted — custodians, security personnel, receptionists, and others. They are truly second-class citizens at Amazon and other companies. Workers subcontracted to deliver packages for Amazon started blowing the whistle on repeated instances of wage theft in 2017, staging a protest outside the company's Eagan, Minnesota fulfillment center on a frigid November day. Many of the demonstrators were East African immigrants who fled political, ethnic, and other persecution in Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia, only to discover a new set of problems in the United States. "In my country I was a professional civil engineer, and I was working this job to pay my bills and to be able to study and get back to my profession," one protester explained. "This has been shocking to see how this country treats immigrants doing work people seem to take for granted." He continued:

*"I am incredibly disappointed not only with the company but also with my experience working in America. This experience is something that too many people face and it has changed my mentality about fairness in America. All of the things I heard about racism and unfairness were shown to be true. My hope is that this company doesn't represent the rest of the country."*⁵²

Sadly, it does represent the general direction in which employment in the US seems to be heading. Witness how leading players in the "sharing economy" are loathe to even call their workers employees. Ride-hailing giant Uber's stupendous global success and wealth is only possible because of the hard work of its "driver partners", but it squeezes its drivers in a race to the bottom of ever-lower earnings and unsympathetic treatment. Ask any random Uber driver and they'll bristle at the very term "driver partner." They'll tell you that it's a one-way "partnership" in which the driver does the grunt work and takes all the risk for the enrichment of a behemoth company that avoids conferring the rights and responsibilities to which all employees are entitled because they're technically not employees. Uber doesn't have to pay a minimum wage or overtime, or offer benefits, to its workers. It also avoids lawsuits and other liabilities under its current scheme.

There are hopeful signs that this might be changing soon. There have been a number of lawsuits

filed against Uber and other “sharing” or “gig economy” companies, and courts are beginning to rule in favor of workers. This doesn’t happen without serious setbacks along the way. In 2015, the California Labor Commission issued a ruling in favor of a former Uber driver, ordering the company to reimburse her for costs she incurred while she was a driver. The decision said Uber was liable for these costs because its drivers are employees. However, in April 2018 a federal judge in Philadelphia ruled that Uber drivers aren’t employees but rather independent contractors.⁵³ The judge’s “logic” in the ruling strained credulity — he posited that Uber doesn’t exert enough control over its drivers for them to be considered employees; that because they’re free to turn off the app and pee, grab a bite to eat, nap, or do whatever else they please, then they’re really not employees after all. But again, if you ask a full-time Uber driver whose living wage — if she can even earn that much — is dependent upon a bonus pay scheme that requires 40 or more hours a week of work, she’ll likely laugh at the much-ballyhooed driver “freedom” touted by the company. A step forward was then taken shortly after the Philadelphia ruling when the California Supreme Court in May 2018 essentially scrapped a decades-old test for determining the employment status of a worker, making it much easier to classify people as employees rather than independent contractors.⁵⁴ It remains to be seen whether this will prove a transformative ruling, but some sort of major reckoning seems like it is closer rather than further away as the public and the officials they elect are increasingly eager to put an end to the “Wild West” era of largely unregulated gig economy startups.

Within companies, efforts are being made in fits and starts to improve employer-employee relations. At Amazon, a human resources program called Connections engages employees with daily questions about various work-related issues in a bid to better understand the company’s massive workforce and its concerns. However, some Amazonians expressed concerns that they could face repercussions and reprisals for answering these questions honestly, while others have questioned whether Connections is an effective tool to begin with. Much better received has been Forte, Amazon’s revamped employee review program that in a company notorious for its often ruthless and Darwinian review and critique process,⁵⁵ now focuses more on worker strengths rather than on weaknesses.

As a former Amazonian, I think I am in a position to assert that HR programs might look good on

paper, but all the programs in the world can't make up for some really stupid policies and actions, mistakes that anyone with a bit of common sense ought to be able to avoid. I'll give you one example: Due to my back issues I was fitted for an ergonomic chair, but believe it or not, as part of Amazon's cost-cutting and other principles, two employees are assigned to one desk! Who wants to work for a company where management doesn't care enough about employees to get them their own desks? Or where the burdens of the workday are so onerous? Who wants to work where employees spend eight hours each day in a cold environment where people don't think about each other except to try to out-compete each other?

I was so overworked at Amazon. Some of my partners had whole teams assigned to them; I had to manage these partners with just the help of a part-time solutions engineer. I never felt like I had the support that I needed. I had *four* bosses in one year, for goodness sake! Besides all this there was just a glaring lack of humanity at Amazon. Don't get me wrong, a lot of Amazonians are individually caring people. But when I was laid up in the hospital, I got a gift basket from my partners wishing me well. I got nothing from Amazon.

3- The Environmental Impact of Technology Development

According to a recent article in Time magazine concerning a report from Greenpeace, the cloud — and the associated networks that deliver the data — consumes so much energy that it's as if it were the world's sixth most energy depleting nation. After this leading environmental protection group called out tech companies about the problem, some of the biggest energy consumers among the bunch — including Apple, Google, Facebook, and others — vowed to dramatically slash energy consumption at their data centers. They followed through on their promise, with some powering their data centers completely from renewable energy sources. Apple and Facebook built new data centers running on 100 percent renewable energy. Amazon, which was at first reluctant to follow suit, soon did so as well, with AWS issuing a low-key yet important statement highlighting its new "long-term commitment to achieve 100% renewable energy usage for our global infrastructure footprint." By 2018 AWS had achieved 50 percent renewable energy usage. It has half a dozen solar farms generating 200 megawatts in Virginia as well as a trio of wind farms in North Carolina that

make 458 megawatts. These renewable projects are expected to deliver over two million megawatt hours of energy onto the power grid to power AWS data centers in Ohio and Virginia. AWS is generating enough electricity to power nearly 200,000 US homes each year, or approximately as many homes as there are in the city of Atlanta, Georgia. Additionally, AWS, which announced its first carbon-neutral region way back in 2011, now offers five carbon-neutral regions for its customers to utilize. There's a ripple effect since AWS servers host Netflix, Pinterest, Spotify, Vine, Airbnb, and many other websites.⁵⁶

The massive size, influence, and financial resources of the leading tech companies makes them ideally placed to take the type of meaningful action to combat climate change and other ecological destruction which threatens the very existence of humanity on Earth. Where governments lack the political will, efficiency, and speed needed to drive these necessary changes, the tech industry, with its obsession with innovation and break-neck pace of development, is stepping up and stepping in to fill in the gaps that the government can't or won't. This isn't just limited to the United States. Climate change affects the entire planet, and companies like Amazon are implementing solutions across all the countries in which they operate. China, where there are millions of new Internet users with each passing year, is one of the world's leading actors in the fight against climate change. Amazon is planning to open new data centers running on renewable energy to keep up with the tremendous and ever-growing demand there.

This is more than just doing right by the planet. A Google spokesperson told TechRepublic that the company views renewable energy as a business opportunity. But business without ethics (in this case the ethics of planet over profit) isn't a sustainable model, and Google and other tech companies know it. That's why Google quit the American Legislative Exchange Council, better known by its infamous acronym ALEC, following other companies like Microsoft which withdrew from the pro-business lobby. Google explained its decision by accusing ALEC of lying about climate change. The group rejects the international consensus by around 97 percent of climate scientists that human activity, especially carbon emissions, are responsible for and driving climate change.

ALEC, which says it "provides a constructive forum for state legislators and private sector leaders

to discuss and exchange practical, state-level public policy issues,” has drafted sample legislation that would prohibit the implementation of climate-mitigating regulations and laws, including the Trump-scuppered Obama-era Clean Power Plan. ALEC is almost completely funded by corporations, special interest and lobby groups, and trade associations. Its model legislation is often adopted word-for-word by state legislatures, once tragically without even removing traces of its provenance. ALEC’s proposals are almost entirely Republican-sponsored, with only 10 percent of bills based on ALEC model legislation sponsored by Democrats. The most common subjects of model bills are immigration and climate change, followed by guns and crime. One of the most controversial bills ever put forth by ALEC resulted in the Castle Doctrine Act which gives occupants of a home the right to protect life and property with the use of deadly force. ALEC also wrote bills outlawing sanctuary cities for undocumented immigrants, bills against the disclosure of the components in the proprietary fluids used in hydraulic fracturing (fracking), bills against firearm controls, and were against measures that affirmed steps needed to combat climate change, to name but a few.⁵⁷ Public backlash against ALEC’s overtly pro-corporate, anti-planet agenda led to a mass exodus of the group’s members beginning in 2014, when Microsoft — followed by Google, Facebook, Yelp, Yahoo, Uber, and Lyft — said they would either quit or not join the group. Soon even some of the worst corporate actors, including fossil fuel companies, were dropping out. ExxonMobil, which had given ALEC more than \$1.8 million (part of the more than \$35 million the group has spent on deceiving the public about climate change) even quit the group in 2018.⁵⁸



4- Privacy

There is no doubt that technology is invading our privacy. Your device probably knows more about you than your best friend. As our work and personal lives become more connected and integrated with the technology that powers our world, we often let our guard down. We have become so used to and dependent on pervasive, invasive technology that we've grown comfortable with ubiquitous surveillance in one form or another. We store intimate and valuable personal data on our devices without giving too much thought to who else can access it or what they're doing with it. In the landmark 2014 Supreme Court decision *Riley v. California*, the majority wrote that "the fact that technology now allows an individual to carry such information in his hand does not make the information any less worthy of the protection for which the Founders fought." As technology continues to develop faster than lawmakers can guarantee privacy protections, both government and corporations are getting away with tracking and surveilling us in ways that were not too long ago the stuff of science fiction, if they could be imagined at all. They glean immense amounts of data about our locations, communications, online searches, purchases, and much, much more. It's not just privacy that's compromised by all of this. Our right to freedom of expression, our security (both online and off), and the equality promised in the Constitution and other documents are all infringed, sometimes in shocking ways. We are all faced with having to choose between embracing the latest technologies and protecting our civil liberties. It shouldn't be this way, and that's why privacy and privacy rights are a central focus of Ethics In Tech.

Back in 1999, Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy raised eyebrows and ire in and beyond the tech industry when he infamously called consumer privacy issues a "red herring." "You have zero privacy anyway," McNeal told a group of reporters. "Get over it."⁵⁹ McNealy's statement shocked back then, but it has only grown truer with each passing year. In 2010, Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg essentially reiterated McNealy's sentiment, updated for the burgeoning social media era, when he declared that privacy was no longer a "social norm." Zuckerberg asserted that "people have gotten really comfortable not only sharing more and different kinds of information, but more openly with more people." He noted that when he started Facebook a lot of his fellow Harvard students didn't get it; they asked him why on Earth would they want to broadcast their private information and images across the Internet. Of course we now know that it was only a matter of time before Facebook launched Beacon, its controversial advertisement system released in 2007

that allowed companies to track users' online activities.⁶⁰ This concerned and angered those who were paying attention — admittedly not so many folks in those days — and who understood the wider societal implications of intrusions on online privacy. Electronic Frontier Foundation called changes in Facebook's privacy policy a ploy to get users to share even more information, accusing the company of actually reducing the amount of control people had over their personal data. The worst part of the new policy, according to EFF, was that Facebook now treated information including names, profile pictures, current city, gender, networks, pages "Liked" and Friend lists as "publicly available information," meaning you no longer had the option of keeping it private. The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada completed an investigation of Facebook's privacy policies and practices in September 2010 concluding that changes made by the company brought it more in line with Canada's privacy laws. One of the investigators' main concerns was that third-party developers of games and other popular apps had virtually unrestricted access to Facebook users' personal data. While the Canadian government inquiry concluded that Facebook was making strides toward addressing some of its most egregious privacy violations, it was still concerned that the company was expanding the categories of user data it was making available for all to see as well as not giving users enough control over privacy settings.⁶¹ In Norway the national consumer council has repeatedly taken Facebook to task for these and other practices. A 2018 report accused both Facebook and Google of embedding "dark patterns" — exploitive design choices — into their interfaces in a dubious effort to persuade users to share as much personal data as possible. The Norwegian Consumer Council report concluded:

Facebook and Google have privacy intrusive defaults, where users who want the privacy friendly option have to go through a significantly longer process. They even obscure some of these settings so that the user cannot know that the more privacy intrusive option was preselected.

The popups from Facebook, Google, and Windows 10 have design, symbols, and wording that nudge users away from the privacy friendly choices. Choices are worded to compel users to make certain choices, while key information is omitted or downplayed. None of them lets the user freely postpone decisions. Also, Facebook and Google threaten users with loss of functionality or deletion of the user account if the user does not choose the privacy intrusive option...

Users are given an illusion of control through privacy settings. Firstly, Facebook gives the user an impression of control over use of third party data to show ads while it turns out that the control is much more limited than it initially appears. Secondly,

Google's privacy dashboard promises to let the user easily delete user data, but the dashboard turns out to be difficult to navigate, more resembling a maze than a tool for user control.

The combination of privacy intrusive defaults and the use of dark patterns nudge users of Facebook and Google, and to a lesser degree Windows 10, toward the least privacy friendly options to a degree that we consider unethical. We question whether this is in accordance with the principles of data protection by default and data protection by design, and if consent given under these circumstances can be said to be explicit, informed, and freely given.⁶²

In 2014, the now-infamous UK-based political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica began collecting the personal information of tens of millions of Facebook users, data which was then allegedly used by the company to influence voters in favor of its client politicians. In late 2015 *The Guardian* reported that presidential candidate Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) was utilizing psychological data based on research of 87 million Facebook users — data largely taken without users' explicit consent — in an attempt to gain an edge over his GOP presidential rivals. Cambridge Analytica, which is funded by the reclusive hedge fund billionaire and Republican donor Robert Mercer, used these psychological profiles (as did conservative super PACs backed by the Mercer family) to subject voters to “behavioral micro-targeting” in a bid to help win votes.⁶³ In 2018 Christopher Wylie, a Canadian former Cambridge Analytica employee turned whistleblower, came forward with even more disturbing details regarding the stunning size and scope of the company's data collection and Facebook's role. He called himself the chief architect of “Steve Bannon's psychological warfare mindfuck tool.”⁶⁴

In addition to Cruz and Trump's campaigns, Cambridge Analytica also worked to influence the outcome of the 2016 UK Brexit campaign and the 2018 Mexican general election. Facebook CEO Zuckerberg was forced to apologize for what he called a “mistake” and a “breach of trust.” He took out full-page ads in major papers across in both the United States and abroad promising “to do better.” He was also subjected to a multi-day congressional grilling from which he emerged chastised yet largely unscathed, even if public trust in the world's most prominent social media platform had been eroded considerably. During the congressional hearings, Zuckerberg indicated he

was open to ethics regulations in the tech industry, possibly including a rule suggested by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) that would require Facebook to notify users of a data breach within 72 hours. This is the standard established in the new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) implemented in the European Union in May 2018.⁶⁵

However, if you listen carefully to Zuckerberg's testimony and apology you'll notice that while he calls it an "issue" and concedes there was a "breach of trust," he never uses the term "data breach." Some current and former Facebook officials argued that users who took personality quizzes and other data-leeching apps had actually consented to sharing their data. "Unequivocally not a data breach," tweeted a defiant Andrew "Boz" Bosworth, Facebook's consumer hardware VP. "No systems were infiltrated, no passwords or information were stolen or hacked."⁶⁶

The emergence of the mass surveillance state over the past two decades has arguably been the most disturbing development affecting the privacy of just about everyone on the planet. This is not an overstatement, as former National Security Agency employee turned whistleblower revealed in his Earth-shaking leaks beginning in 2013. Snowden copied at least tens of thousands, and perhaps as many as 200,000, NSA and Pentagon documents, many of them classified. He shared them with journalists including Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras, and Ewen McCaskill. These journalists, over a long period of time, published them in papers and on news sites around the world, including *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*. The Snowden leaks first revealed previously unknown details regarding the scope and scale of the NSA's global surveillance program, which operated with the close co-operation of British, Australian, and Canadian intelligence. Through its PRISM program, the NSA collected Internet communications with the active help of leading telecom and tech firms including Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Apple, and Facebook.⁶⁷ The NSA utilized a big data analysis and data visualization tool it called Boundless Informant to catalog its worldwide surveillance, a direct contradiction of the agency's assurances to Congress and the American people that it was not collecting data on millions of individuals. XKeyscore, a data retrieval system consisting of a series of user interfaces, backend databases, servers, and software, was also revealed. According to Snowden, with XKeyscore,

You could read anyone's email in the world, anybody you've got an email address for. Any website: You can watch traffic to and from it. Any computer that an

individual sits at: You can watch it. Any laptop that you're tracking: You can follow it as it moves from place to place throughout the world. It's a one-stop-shop for access to the NSA's information.

You can tag individuals... Let's say you work at a major German corporation and I want access to that network, I can track your username on a website on a form somewhere, I can track your real name, I can track associations with your friends and I can build what's called a fingerprint, which is network activity unique to you, which means anywhere you go in the world, anywhere you try to sort of hide your online presence, your identity.⁶⁸

The NSA spied on the social media profiles of millions of Americans and countless millions more people around the world in a truly global effort to discover and track connections between American citizens and suspected terrorists. In service of its never-ending worldwide War on Terror, the US government, with the assistance of major tech and telecom companies, had been engaged in a sweeping and illegal surveillance dragnet of phone and online communications since 2001. This has included warrantless wiretapping and monitoring of Americans' communications. Under President Barack Obama, Justice Department officials acknowledged that the NSA was guilty of "overcollection" of domestic communications, but claimed such illegal acts were unintentional and that the practice had been corrected. However, Obama then quietly signed into law a reauthorization of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Amendments Act of 2008, which permits the warrantless wiretapping of phone and electronic communications in which at least one of the persons involved is a foreigner. At times Snowden's revelations were downright bizarre — the NSA infiltrated popular online gaming and social media communities including World of Warcraft and Second Life, and it spied on some of America's closest allies and other world leaders including the Pope.⁶⁹

Snowden's bombshell leaks shattered what was already a badly-cracked facade of privacy. People today — especially the younger generations — have nearly no expectation of privacy. According to a 2015 Pew Research poll, only 6 percent of Americans were "very confident" that government agencies would safeguard the privacy of their personal information, with the same percentage expressing high confidence that telecom companies would do likewise. More than two-thirds of respondents said they had little or no confidence that social media sites, search engines, or online

video sites would protect their data.⁷⁰

Of course the erosion of privacy isn't just limited to our online lives. Just about everything you do is being watched or tracked. Just take a walk outside and down the street of any major city and you'll see buildings bristling with cameras. We're constantly being watched in cities and towns big and small across the nation. Fear of terrorism and growing affordability of closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) and other technology has fueled the trend toward the ubiquitous surveillance we more or less take for granted. Indeed, an April 2013 *New York Times*/CBS poll found that Americans overwhelmingly favor installing video surveillance cameras in public places. Fully 78 percent of respondents said surrendering their privacy and civil liberties was an acceptable tradeoff for greater security.⁷¹ Granted, this was just a week after the Boston Marathon bomb attacks, but one is left to wonder whether those 78 percent have ever heard Benjamin Franklin's prescient warning that "those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

In that case, the town of Tiburon, California, located just a short drive north of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, surely must not deserve either. The affluent bayside community of 9,100 residents, almost all of them white, is served by just two roads in and out of town. Tiburon is an extremely safe place, yet its Town Council decided to spend \$200,000 to place six security cameras (critics call them "insecurity cameras") along the roads to monitor every vehicle entering or leaving town. While police do run license plate checks on individual vehicles all the time, civil libertarians are alarmed by what they call "scope creep" — with serious Fourth Amendment questions arising. Those cameras not only record your license plate, they also run the plate number through a law enforcement database and cross-check it with vehicles known or believed to be involved in crimes. The most famous crime caught on camera in Tiburon was the 2011 theft of celebrity chef Guy Fieri's yellow Lamborghini by a local teenager. But in a super-safe town where there hasn't been a murder in a decade and where less than a car a month was stolen before the cameras were installed, many concerned residents and civil liberties groups near and far have vehemently opposed mass surveillance. "Comprehensive location tracking, which is made possible by advances in technology such as these license-plate readers, reveal all kinds of intimate details about a person's life," Stephanie Martin, an ACLU attorney, told KQED. "Visits to the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting,

the gay bar, the union hall, the abortion clinic, and so on.”⁷²

Back across the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco it’s much more than just a few cameras monitoring incoming and outgoing traffic. “There are not a lot of spots left where there’s not some sort of private or public surveillance camera,” Nadia Kayyali of Electronic Frontier Foundation told CBS San Francisco. “The idea that you can sort of meet in a public place and quietly have a conversation... is really not realistic anymore.” Indeed, according to San Francisco police, the average city resident appears on camera dozens of times every day, depending on their movements. Kayyali argues that the level of monitoring to which we are all subjected on a daily basis is outpacing the NSA’s surveillance.⁷³

The rise of facial recognition technology raises the prospect of even more invasive and pervasive surveillance, both public and private in origin. Of course such new technologies are always touted as a way to decrease terrorism or crime and to increase security. Such is the case with Face-Int, a database of facial profiles of thousands of terrorism suspects harvested from social media sites including Facebook, YouTube, and other online forums. FaceInt was created by a company called Terrogeance, which was bought by the Israeli firm Verint in 2017. More than 35,000 online videos and photos were stored and analyzed by FaceInt, making Terrogeance yet another tech company that, like Cambridge Analytica, was able to secretly capitalize upon Facebook’s openness for its own dubious purposes.⁷⁴ It doesn’t take much imagination to envision a “scope creep” scenario in which FaceInt’s use is expanded beyond terrorism and into the realm of the political — or even for the benefit of corporations or other private actors. Tech companies including Amazon have positioned themselves to be major players in facial recognition technology marketed to law enforcement, a development that even many workers of those companies vehemently oppose. In June 2018 Amazon employees signed and sent a letter to Jeff Bezos asking him to order the company to stop selling facial recognition software to law enforcement agencies and to stop its business dealings with Palantir, a data mining company started by Peter Thiel. Thiel is a billionaire investor who co-founded PayPal and who curiously considers himself a libertarian. Palantir develops predictive policing tools, the kind of technology that was until quite recently the stuff of sci-fi films like “Minority Report.” But “pre-crime” has gone from fantasy to reality, with firms like

Palantir and Amazon at the cutting edge. More than 100 Amazon employees signed the letter, which read:

Dear Jeff,

We are troubled by the recent report from the ACLU exposing our company's practice of selling AWS Recognition, a powerful facial recognition technology, to police departments and government agencies. We don't have to wait to find out how these technologies will be used. We already know that in the midst of historic militarization of police, renewed targeting of Black activists, and the growth of a federal deportation force currently engaged in human rights abuses — this will be another powerful tool for the surveillance state and ultimately serve to harm the most marginalized. We are not alone in this view: Over 40 civil rights organizations signed an open letter in opposition to the governmental use of facial recognition, while over 150,000 individuals signed another petition delivered by the ACLU.

We also know that Palantir runs on AWS. And we know that ICE relies on Palantir to power its detention and deportation programs. Along with much of the world we watched in horror recently as U.S. authorities tore children away from their parents. Since April 19, 2018 the Department of Homeland Security has sent nearly 2,000 children to mass detention centers. This treatment goes against U.N. Refugee Agency guidelines that say children have the right to remain united with their parents, and that asylum-seekers have a legal right to claim asylum. In the face of this immoral U.S. policy, and the U.S.'s increasingly inhumane treatment of refugees and immigrants beyond this specific policy, we are deeply concerned that Amazon is implicated, providing infrastructure and services that enable ICE and DHS.

Technology like ours is playing an increasingly critical role across many sectors of society. What is clear to us is that our development and sales practices have yet to acknowledge the obligation that comes with this. Focusing solely on shareholder value is a race to the bottom, and one that we will not participate in.

We refuse to build the platform that powers ICE, and we refuse to contribute to tools that violate human rights.

As ethically concerned Amazonians, we demand a choice in what we build and a say in how it is used. We learn from history, and we understand how IBM's systems were employed in the 1940s to help Hitler. IBM did not take responsibility then, and by the

*time their role was understood, it was too late. We will not let that happen again.
The time to act is now.*

We call on you to:

- 1 . Stop selling facial recognition services to law enforcement.*
- 2. Stop providing infrastructure to Palantir and any other Amazon partners who enable ICE.*
- 3. Implement strong transparency and accountability measures that include enumerating which law enforcement agencies, and companies supporting law enforcement agencies, are using Amazon services, and how.*

Our company should not be in the surveillance business; we should not be in the policing business; we should not be in the business of supporting those who monitor and oppress marginalized populations.

Sincerely,

Amazonians

Of course our government has been using technology to surveil us for a very long time — and it's been watching some of us a lot more than others. Perhaps the all-time classic example of this is the FBI's COINTELPRO (COunter INTELligence PROgram). Originally launched by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover in 1956 to monitor and thwart US communists, within two months the program was targeting the growing civil rights movement. In one of the most dubious acts of surveillance in US history, Robert F. Kennedy, attorney general during the John F. Kennedy administration, authorized the wiretapping of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s phone. William Sullivan, the head agent in charge of COINTELPRO, reflected the prevalent thinking among American law enforcement when he warned that "we must mark [King]... as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this nation."⁷⁵ Mind you, this was right before the civil rights icon was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his leading role in the nonviolent struggle against Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement, and other racial injustices. Under COINTELPRO the FBI bugged King's home and hotel rooms, then sent anonymous letters in a bid to encourage him to kill himself. Agents even sent King's wife

a recording of what they claimed was her husband with an alleged mistress. When King slammed the FBI for ignoring horrific and sometimes murderous crimes committed with impunity by members of the still-powerful Ku Klux Klan, Hoover was infuriated. He even called the honorable King the nation's "most notorious liar."⁷⁶ As is still the case in the United States today, identifying and condemning racism was too often seen as a worse offense than the racism itself. Would you expect it to be any other way in a nation built on a foundation of genocide and slavery?

That other slain giant of the 1960s civil rights movement, Malcolm X, was also targeted under COINTELPRO. FBI agents infiltrated his Organization of Afro-American Unity during the final months of his life, fomenting division and conflict among the group's members which led up to X's assassination. Other targeted groups included the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, the Nation of Islam, the Socialist Workers Party, the Ku Klux Klan, National Lawyers Guild, the women's liberation movement, and other groups and causes on both the Left and the Right.⁷⁷ But the very worst of COINTELPRO and associated groups' surveillance, infiltration, psychological operations, illegal harassment, violence, and even assassinations (most notably of Black Panther leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago in 1969) were reserved for Black people fighting for the justice and equality long promised but long denied by their country.

Too many people think such unconscionable — indeed unconstitutional — racial surveillance is a thing of the distant past. It's not. Federal, state, and local law enforcement have infiltrated, tracked, or monitored Black Lives Matter and other groups. During the 2014 BLM protests surrounding the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, FBI agents tracked activists as they traveled across the country to participate in the demonstrations.

And it's not just racial justice groups. Documents obtained by The Intercept shed light on surveillance activities that went far beyond the online intelligence gathering that had been previously reported. Although heavily redacted, the documents suggested that federal agents had staked out the homes and vehicles of people associated with Black Lives Matter.⁷⁸ In Memphis, police went so far as to create fake social media accounts to spy on BLM. Upon admitting this, the city's chief legal officer called such surreptitious surveillance "simply good police work."⁷⁹

In one somewhat humorous incident, Massachusetts State Police accidentally tweeted a photo showing a computer screen with progressive groups bookmarked in the browser window, confirming the suspicions of those in movements like Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and other social justice movements.80

There is also a long history in the United States of government and private companies or interests working together to draft watch lists and databases of targeted groups and individuals. But especially since 9/11 it seems as if we are constantly being watched. Our government watches us. Corporations watch us, especially including the ones we work for. Our devices watch us — I remember laughing when a college professor predicted back in the 1990s that one day even our toilets and refrigerators would monitor us. Well, the Internet of Things is here, it's here to stay and I can report that while my fridge is of the old-school variety, there are plenty of refrigerators and other home appliances that are Internet-connected. And yes, at the 2018 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, Kohler unveiled its Numi multifunctional toilet, powered by Amazon's Alexa. You can ask Numi to prep the bidet, play songs from your stored playlists (it's got speakers) and — in a potential game-changer for romantic relationships everywhere — even lower the seat!81

If there's a silver lining to global mass surveillance, it's that people all over the world are now aware of it and pushing back against its excesses. Informed people really can make a difference, as we saw in 2012 during the coordinated protests against a pair of proposed laws, the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and PROTECT IP Act (PIPA), which critics including myself argued would have infringed on online free speech. Organized by Fight for the Future, protests — both online and off — against SOPA and PIPA involved over 100,000 websites and millions of people. Millions of Americans emailed their members of Congress in opposition to the bills. A Google petition collected more than 4.5 million signatures. Wikipedia and Reddit led online protests by temporarily shutting down their sites and redirecting users to a page opposing the bills. Other sites — including Google, Flickr, and Mozilla — prominently expressed their opposition, while companies that supported the measures, including GoDaddy, were targeted with boycotts. Amid this, the Obama White House put out a statement promising the administration would "not support legislation that reduces freedom of expression, increases cybersecurity risk, or undermines the dynamic, innovative global Internet." The protests worked; neither SOPA nor PIPA became law. We would do well to

remember the level of vigilance and action necessary to defeat measures that infringe upon our rights. As EFF said, “If the victory against SOPA/PIPA taught us anything, it’s that whether or not the Internet will remain a place that everyone can access reliably and affordably to share, connect, and create freely depends on us.”⁸²

Another evolving fight over privacy involves terms of service. In May 2018 the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Byrd v. United States* that the driver of a rental car had a constitutional right to reasonable expectation of privacy in the vehicle even though he wasn’t authorized to operate the vehicle under the terms of the rental agreement. In the case at hand, Pennsylvania state troopers pulled over Terrence Byrd, who was driving a rental car his girlfriend had loaned him; his girlfriend was the only driver authorized by the rental agreement. The state troopers used this as probable cause to search the vehicle, in which they discovered 49 bricks of heroin. Byrd claimed the search violated the Fourth Amendment prohibition of unreasonable search and seizure. Two lower courts ruled against him, but the Supreme Court decided in his favor. In essence, what the high court was saying is that your expectation of privacy shouldn’t depend on the fine print in a rental contract or other agreement.⁸³ In other cases, courts — including the Supreme Court — have ruled that by merely agreeing to terms of service you waive your Fourth Amendment rights. Such was the case in *United States v. Frank DiTomassi* in which AOL reported a man for online transmission of child pornography. The court ruled that:

*A reasonable person familiar with AOL’s policy would understand that by agreeing to the policy, he was consenting not just to monitoring by AOL as an ISP, but also to monitoring by AOL as a government agent. Therefore, DiTomasso’s Fourth Amendment challenge fails as to the emails.*⁸⁴

The *DiTomasso* ruling cites *Smith v. Maryland* in which the Supreme Court distinguishes between the “contents of communication” and the ancillary information accidentally disclosed by such communication. Data — the former — is protected under the Fourth Amendment while the latter, often metadata, forfeits such constitutional protection upon disclosure. *DiTomasso* also cites *United States v. Jones* in which the Supreme Court found that, under the Fourth Amendment, installing a GPS tracking device on a vehicle and monitoring its movements amounts to a search. Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote that:

It may be necessary to reconsider the premise that an individual has no reasonable expectation of privacy in information voluntarily disclosed to third parties... This approach is ill suited to the digital age, in which people reveal a great deal of information about themselves to third parties in the course of carrying out mundane tasks. People disclose the phone numbers that they dial or text to their cellular providers; the URLs that they visit and the e-mail addresses with which they correspond to their Internet service providers; and the books, groceries, and medications they purchase to online retailers.⁸⁵

5- Artificial Intelligence

AI is the hot topic around town these days with seemingly everyone abuzz about the progress, possibilities, and perils of artificial intelligence development. The burgeoning creation of thinking machines excites humanity with possibilities, but it also raises serious ethical questions that must be addressed early on. Not only are ethicists concerned with ensuring machines do no harm to humans, they must also grapple with questions of the moral status of the machines themselves. As workplace automation continues apace, how can we best manage the inevitable disruption and displacement that will result? How do we best distribute the wealth generated by machines? How do we guard against AI bias (yes, it's a thing)?⁸⁶ How do we protect AI against adversaries? How will AI affect the way we behave and interact with not only other humans, but with AI as well? How can we safeguard against AI mistakes, and how on Earth will we proceed once the singularity (the point at which AI evolves past the level of human intelligence into what some believe will be a super-intelligence that could mean the end of humanity) is reached? How do we manage unintended consequences? What, if any, rights will we bestow upon the intelligent machines we create?⁸⁷ These and other critical questions must be answered if we are to proceed ethically and responsibly with AI development.

As a spiritual man and as a student of the late Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman, I believe that all life is holy. If all life is holy then AI should be ethically bound to the preservation of life. "Thou shalt not kill" should be one of the fundamental principles guiding the development of AI. If it is, then it is highly unethical to work for or promote the tech companies that do not respect this core guiding principle. There are tech companies that are creating instruments of war, instruments whose only

purpose is to kill other human beings. Many of these companies have grown fantastically wealthy offering Death and Destruction as a Service. Others have been complicit in maintaining and promoting the machinery of systemic oppression. Unfortunately, war and oppression are highly lucrative endeavors. Both corporate executives and Pentagon planners, those twin pillars of the military-industrial complex, are drooling over the possibilities of profit and power they see in artificial intelligence. When most people think of AI and the battlefield of the future, they imagine scenes from *The Terminator* or other sci-fi flicks of their youth. What's more likely in the shorter term is that AI will be an enabler, like electricity or the internal combustion engine in earlier eras. AI will improve the accuracy and efficacy of weapons systems. It will make them faster, more agile, and better able to quickly respond to the rapidly shifting facts on the battleground. The ability to rapidly process the literally overwhelming amount of incoming data during wartime will be critical to achieving mission success, and AI is the key to realizing this ability. Of course, at some point Skynet, the AI overlord in *The Terminator* franchise, will become a very real possibility. Elon Musk and the late, great Stephen Hawking are among the many leading minds who have said they fear AI could spark World War III or worse.⁸⁸ With the stakes being potentially the extinction of humanity, wouldn't it be prudent to proceed with well-defined and universally accepted ethics rules for AI?

The military-industrial complex has given us some of the most important things in our lives today. The now-indispensable Internet, for example, was born half a century ago from the Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). It would be naive to advocate total destruction of certain aspects and elements of the military-industrial complex, but ethics are more important than ever in this area. Just as society developed an ethical framework to govern use of the Internet, it must now devise rules governing the use of artificial intelligence. And just as watchdogs, whistleblowers, and other activists sound the alarm whenever government, corporate, or other powers attempt to flout the rules (the fight over net neutrality comes to mind), we must now be ever vigilant in the face of rapidly-developing AI technology and its burgeoning application.

Much more than the military — which is, after all, in the business of killing people — tech companies are wrestling with and devising guidelines for the ethical development and use of artificial intelligence. Google recently released a set of AI ethics principles which include being socially beneficial, avoiding algorithmic bias, being safe and accountable, and protecting privacy.

Google explicitly stated that it would not develop or deploy AI for weapons, illegal surveillance, violations of international law or human rights, or “technologies that cause or are likely to cause overall harm.”⁸⁹ While Google was widely applauded for addressing concerns regarding the ethical use of AI, digital rights advocates including Electronic Frontier Foundation have raised concerns that ethics policies like Google’s don’t go far enough. Google, for example, hasn’t committed to any sort of independent transparent review to ensure the company adheres to its own ethics principles.⁹⁰ And while Google’s ethics code commits to avoiding human rights abuses, the company’s willingness to bend to the will of the Chinese government in order to do business in one of the world’s biggest consumer markets gives lie to its own stated principles.

As I said, when most people imagine the potential dangers of AI they imagine a “Terminator”-type situation in which “awakened” machines far surpass humans in intelligence and then either exterminate us or make us their slaves — or worse their food source à la “The Matrix.” The actual dangers we are likely to face from AI are far less apocalyptic yet still quite perilous. Take Deepfakes, AI software that renders artificial facial imagery, for example. A malicious actor could use Deepfakes to create fake pornographic content in which a celebrity’s — or your — face is digitally superimposed over that of an adult film actor’s in an X-rated video. Ariana Grande, Gal Gadot, and Taylor Swift are among the celebrities who have been targeted.⁹¹

Bugsplat

“Thou shalt not kill” keeps playing over and over again in my head as I think about some of the more sinister advances and applications of technology. Killing is made a lot easier when you don’t even regard the people you’re killing as fully human. Dehumanization has always been a part of armed struggle, but technology allows this species of ours to satiate its bloodlust in a sanitary manner never before witnessed in the annals of warfare. Sanitary for the killer, at least. There tend to be definite dehumanizing effects inherent in the application of technology for the business of death and destruction. Take the example of unmanned aerial drone warfare. Most people don’t know that the US drones raining so much destruction upon militants and innocent civilians alike in an arc stretching from northern Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia aren’t locally controlled. They’re

controlled from facilities in the United States, where kids from the second video game generation are commanded by officers from the first one to execute life-and-death missions. They do this from the comfort and safety of air-conditioned control rooms half a world away from the men, women, and children they're killing. It's easy enough to dehumanize the "enemy" in wartime when you're facing them on the field of battle. It's even easier to rationalize killing, maiming, terrorizing, and displacing people when you don't have to see their faces or even understand anything about their lives because you're blowing them up from 8,000 miles away. Before too long you find yourself fully immersed in the perversely absurd and you must choose whether you will swim in the shit or drown in it.

Iraq is a country that had absolutely nothing to do with the September 11th, 2001 terror attacks, but, nevertheless, it was cited to justify Bush's illegal war. In preparation for the 2003 US-led invasion and occupation, the Pentagon's war planners created a computer model to estimate how many innocent civilians were likely to be killed in a given aerial bombardment. They called their program "Bugsplat". That was also what some of them called their victims. When the military was planning its "shock and awe" campaign of massive bombardment of heavily-populated central Baghdad, Gen. Tommy Franks was informed of 22 proposed targets where bombing would likely result in "heavy bugsplat," or more than 30 civilian deaths per raid. The good general approved all 22 bombings.⁹²

There is another valuable public function of Ethics In Tech, and that's raising public awareness. Just today I was discussing how cloud computing giant Salesforce may be profiting from one of the Trump administration's internationally condemned policies. The company may be gaining revenue from the administration's cruel tactic of separating undocumented refugee children — some of them just infants — from their parents in a bid to discourage them from fleeing deadly violence and economic privation (much of which was caused by decades of US foreign policy). Salesforce has a lucrative contract with US Customs and Border Patrol which uses the company's products in committing Child Abuse as a Service.⁹³ Most people don't think of this when they think of Salesforce. If they're in the industry, they might think of its customer success stories or of Dreamforce, the company's annual extravaganza conference in San Francisco. If they're from the

Bay Area they'll probably think of the Salesforce Tower, San Francisco's first super-tall skyscraper that now looms above the rest of the glistening city skyline. But very few, if any, people are thinking about Salesforce's role in bolstering the Trump administration's racist policies and actions targeting both documented and undocumented immigrants. That's because they don't know about it. Part of what Ethics In Tech does is raise public awareness about the crimes and misdeeds of tech companies and other industry actors whom the public generally views positively or neutrally.

Considerable ink has been expended exploring ethical issues arising from the intended use of technology, but we must also consider and plan as best as possible for the unintended consequences and uses of tech. Take Facebook for example. When its stock plummeted amid allegations of misuse and fallout from the Cambridge Analytica scandal it didn't just affect Facebook; it was a drag on nearly the entire tech sector. And who would have imagined back when Facebook launched that it would come to be used as one of the leading platforms for online bullying?⁹⁴ Some have argued that tech is in a state of crisis that requires skilled crisis managers to find solutions. Ian I. Mitroff, professor emeritus at the Marshall School of Business and the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Southern California, asserts that we need a government agency similar to the Food and Drug Administration to monitor the social impact of technology and protect society from its dangers:

*We must establish panels composed of parents, social scientists, child development experts, ethicists, crisis management authorities, — and kids — to think of as many ways as they can about how a proposed technology could be abused and misused.*⁹⁵

Mitroff argues that this isn't just the right ethical move, it's also good for companies' bottom lines:

*Ideally, tech companies would do this on their own. Indeed, research has shown that companies that are proactive in anticipating and planning for crises are substantially more profitable than those that are merely reactive. Crisis management is not only the ethical thing to do, it's good for business; it heads off major crises before they are too big to fix.*⁹⁶

Final Thoughts

I hope I haven't spent too much time being a glass-half-empty kind of guy throughout the course of

this book. I'm not; in fact, I'd say the glass is more than half full. When people demand change and they demand it persistently, persuasively, and peacefully enough, change happens. We've seen this throughout our nation's history. The movements to abolish slavery, improve labor conditions, grant women the right to vote, end Jim Crow segregation, and achieve equality for LGBTQ people were all people-powered movements. They were bottom-up in structure. In contemporary times, even profit-seeking corporations are getting "woke" as they realize that siding with injustice can threaten their bottom lines. For a stark example of this we need look no further than corporate America's response to North Carolina's "bathroom law," bigoted legislation passed by Republicans which banned transgender people from using the restroom that matches their gender identity. Public and corporate backlash was swift and severe. PayPal scrapped plans to build a facility that would have pumped more than \$2.6 billion into the state's economy. Major companies, including Deutsche Bank, Adidas, and CoStar backed out of plans to expand in North Carolina. The NAACP launched a boycott, and the NCAA announced the state would not be hosting any championship events until it repealed the law. North Carolina did repeal it — months later under intense, constant pressure which included condemnation from the NBA, the city of San Francisco and tech companies including Apple and Google. More than a year later a team of Amazon officials visiting the state while considering sites for its \$5 billion, 50,000-job HQ2 project grilled state leaders about the repealed law and whether the state was fit to host the facility.⁹⁷ It wasn't the first or last time tech companies stood up for LGBTQ equality; Apple CEO Tim Cook, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, and others have threatened or taken action in response to anti-LGBT legislation in Alabama, Georgia, and elsewhere. Such pressure has successfully scuttled similar legislation in states like Arizona, Georgia, and Indiana— much to the chagrin of then-governor Mike Pence, who once said that gay marriage would lead to "societal collapse."⁹⁸

Unethical actions can have real and lasting consequences, and they can be the catalyst for real and lasting change. Conversely, ethical behavior is richly rewarded if companies can only find a way to eschew short-term thinking and planning and do what's right. I also don't mean to necessarily imply that executives only choose to do the right thing out of profit or public relations motives. Many of them are good people just like you and I who are genuinely seeking to make the world a better place, and who value peace, justice, and equality. Sometimes these people may feel they have no choice but to choose the less ethical path. After all, there is really only one legal imperative for corporations, and that's to return maximum shareholder value. But when executives decide — whether on their own or due to pressure from employees, shareholders, and other stakeholders — to do the right thing, literally the whole world sits up and takes notice. We saw this when Jeff Bezos announced that Amazon would be paying all of its workers at least \$15 an hour (although this raise will reportedly be paid for by unfairly cutting back on the benefits enjoyed by Amazonians higher up the corporate ladder). We saw it when Tim Cook refused to cooperate with the FBI to unlock an iPhone used by Syed Farook, one of the two terrorists who killed 14 people and wounded more than 20 others in a December 2, 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino, California. In that case, EFF, joined by Amazon, Microsoft, Google, and Facebook, filed an amicus brief in support of Apple's uncooperative stance.⁹⁹ We saw it yet again when Salesforce CEO Mark Benioff surprised San

Franciscans by coming out in favor of Proposition C, a city ballot measure meant to tackle the out-of-control homelessness crisis by levying a 0.5 percent gross receipts tax on companies with more than \$50 million in annual revenue. Benioff also pledged to donate \$1 million — half his own money, half through Salesforce — in support of Prop C. “Homelessness is all of our responsibility,” Benioff explained, adding via Twitter that “as SF’s largest employer we realize we are part of the solution.”¹⁰⁰ The Salesforce CEO even went so far as to accuse other tech billionaires of “hoarding” their wealth, and he seemed to target Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey more than anyone else. “He just doesn’t want to give, that’s all, and he hasn’t given anything of consequence in the city,” Benioff tweeted.¹⁰¹ I laud Benioff for putting his money where his mouth was — if passed, Prop C will end up costing his company many millions of dollars. What’s even more remarkable about Benioff’s stance is that it was at odds with the city’s purportedly progressive mayor, London Breed, who opposed Prop C.

Often it is tech workers themselves who spark positive change. In May 2018 Google was set to renew a Pentagon contract on a project called Maven that utilized the company’s technology to improve the efficacy and lethality of military unmanned aerial drone strikes. But thousands of Google employees, including senior engineers, protested the company’s planned participation. A dozen employees resigned in protest. Others expressed serious concerns about Google’s technology being used to wage war. A letter signed by over 4,000 Google personnel asserted:

We believe that Google should not be in the business of war. Therefore we ask that Project Maven be cancelled, and that Google draft, publicize, and enforce a clear policy stating that neither Google nor its contractors will ever build warfare technology... This plan will irreparably damage Google’s brand and its ability to compete for talent. Amid growing fears of biased and weaponized AI, Google is already struggling to keep the public’s trust. By entering into this contract, Google will join the ranks of companies like Palantir, Raytheon, and General Dynamics. The argument that other firms, like Microsoft and Amazon, are also participating doesn’t make this any less risky for Google.

Google’s unique history, its motto Don’t Be Evil, and its direct reach into the lives of billions of users set it apart... We cannot outsource the moral responsibility of our technologies to third parties. Google’s stated values make this clear: Every one of our users is trusting us. Never jeopardize that. Ever. This contract puts Google’s reputation at risk and stands in direct opposition to our core values. Building this technology to assist the US Government in military surveillance — and potentially lethal outcomes — is not acceptable.¹⁰²

This opposition prompted Google to announce it would not renew the Maven contract when it

expires in March 2019. Google CEO Sundar Pichai also unveiled the company's seven AI principles discussed a few pages earlier in this book, chief among them avoidance of "technologies that cause or are likely to cause overall harm." Google had also been among several companies bidding on a Defense Department project called the Joint Enterprise Defense Infrastructure, or JEDI, the Pentagon's effort to build its first enterprise-wide cloud. JEDI was partly designed to improve the military's "lethality and readiness." However, many Google employees strongly objected to what was clearly a violation of the company's freshly-minted AI principles. Following widespread employee protests, Google announced it would be withdrawing its bid, explaining that "we couldn't be assured that it would align with our AI principles."¹⁰³ At the other end of the ethical spectrum, Amazon is, at time of writing, widely considered the frontrunner to win the JEDI bid. The reason for this, say critics including Google, IBM, and Oracle, is that the Pentagon, while fronting a facade of competition, all along intended to award the lucrative contract to a single predetermined vendor — Amazon Web Services. The government did little to dispel such suspicion; when asked directly if it set such high standards that only AWS could meet, the Defense Department did not reply.¹⁰⁴

Of course, there are limits to how much change even large numbers of company employees can achieve. Many Google workers were enraged by the company's decision to secretly build Dragonfly, a search engine that complies with the Chinese government's authoritarian censorship demands, and some employees resigned over the issue. Again, more than one staffer noted the hypocrisy inherent in Google's complicity with Chinese government censorship given the company's Don't No Evil motto. Senior Google scientist Jack Poulson, who quit over Dragonfly, sounded the alarm over the move's wider global implications. "I view our intent to capitulate to censorship and surveillance demands in exchange for access to the Chinese market as a forfeiture of our values and governmental negotiating position across the globe," he wrote in his resignation letter. "There is an all-too-real possibility that other nations will attempt to leverage our actions in China in order to demand our compliance with their security demands."¹⁰⁵ But even when employee protest initially fails to achieve its noble objectives, persistent pressure is the key to eventual success.

Tech companies continue to be complicit in crimes big and small around the world, sometimes in shocking ways. The Palestinian struggle for liberation from half a century of illegal Israeli occupation and Jews-only settler colonization — a situation prominent international observers including Nobel Peace laureates Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have called an apartheid worse than South Africa's — comes immediately to mind.¹⁰⁶ US tech firms including Hewlett-Packard provide technology, equipment, and services to the Israeli military and government that are used to oppress Palestinian men, women, and children. Israel is a leading player in the world of tech, and Israeli technology firms "enjoy" a unique position in being able to test their latest tech in real-time conflict against real-life human beings. When asked what the secret of Israel's tech success is, Guy Keren, CEO of Israeli homeland security firm iHLS said it's "because we are checking our systems live. We are in a war situation all the time. If it's not happening right now, it will happen in a

month.”¹⁰⁷ Activists with the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement hold hope that their concerted and persistent actions could make HP what they call the “Polaroid of our times,” a reference to the successful mass mobilization against the use of Polaroid technology utilized in the former South African apartheid regime’s racist passbook system. Polaroid pulled out of South Africa in 1977 in what is widely regarded as a turning point in the global anti-apartheid campaign.¹⁰⁸

In the darkest of hours it can be difficult to imagine that things can be better. Did people living behind the Iron Curtain in the early 1980s dare dream that they would be free by the decade’s end? Power and pressure — both from within and outside societies and organizations — can move even the mightiest of mountains if they are applied in the right way at the right time.

And so, dear reader, I leave you with a message of hope and a call to action. After all, most people working in the tech industry — like most human beings in general — are good people. They desire racial, gender, sexual, and economic equality. They bristle at the injustice and inequality in the world. But they’re busy. They’re distracted. They’ve got student loan debt and credit card debt and they don’t know whether they’ll still have the same job a year from now. They’ve got to put food in their mouths and roofs over their heads all while keeping their heads about them as they navigate the rough and uncertain waters of their professional lives. Still, they’re the only ones who can bring about a more just future and a more ethical tech industry. It’s an industry that is obsessed with customer success — customer obsession is literally first among Amazon’s leadership principles — but we rarely or never talk about our limits or what kind of projects we aren’t willing to work on. It happens sometimes, as former Google scientist Jack Poulson admirably demonstrated, but it’s rare. I once went to an interview with a major software company that shall remain nameless and I asked them, “Is there anything you won’t do for a customer?” I was met with a blank stare. Maybe if more of us asked questions like this we wouldn’t be met with incredulity but rather with a company codes of ethics that proscribes harmful policies and actions.

I am glad I went to work at Amazon. I have no regrets. The entire experience made me a better person. For all of its faults, I can’t sit here and tell you that Amazon is a “rotten company” like CSC. I don’t think Amazon C-suiters wake up in the morning and think of ways to screw their employees. They create hundreds of thousands of jobs. They feed the needs and cravings of countless millions of consumers. I don’t hate them, I just disagree with some of their business practices and values, or lack thereof. Amazon hires the best and the brightest workers and accordingly expects excellence from them, but the company also suffers from a profound lack of empathy. It’s a world of drone workers where contractors are treated like second-class citizens, as are most of the people paid to do the low-tech work. The custodians, receptionists, security personnel, and others who are essential to the smooth and profitable operation of the company are largely excluded from Amazonian culture. They’re just disposable resources to be used up and spit out. The bad news is this doesn’t make for a very pleasant place to work for many Amazon

employees; the good news is that the problem is totally fixable. Amazon is redeemable, but it's mostly up to Amazonians to redeem it. And it's up to all of us who hold stakes in it to redeem tech, too. Over the years I've won and I've lost in the tech industry. I've spent a lot of time fighting and a lot of time crying. It literally drove me mad. But through it all what I remember most are the *people* without whom the indispensably ubiquitous technology we all need to survive simply wouldn't exist. In addition to being brilliant creators and enablers, these people are also, well, people. Most people are good. They want a better world for themselves, their loved ones, and those who come after them. If you care about ethics in technology, don't just sit there, get out there and help make a difference. Get engaged and get involved. Here in the Bay Area we've got EFF, the Internet Archive, and other organizations dedicated to digital rights issues. These organizations or other groups like them are active in most cities across America.

As I write this, Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi dissident journalist who was very likely tortured and murdered in most gruesome fashion while visiting his country's consulate in Turkey, is dominating headlines around the world. Although I find it very odd that this, the killing of one man, is what it took to get Americans (and indeed many people around the world) to sit up and take notice of the horror show known as the Saudi ruling regime, I also welcome the attention. Titans of tech like Uber CEO Dara Khosrowshahi, whose firm has been greatly enriched by billions of dollars of Saudi investment, swiftly reacted to the crisis. The third annual Future Investment Initiative, also called "Davos in the Desert," is just two weeks away as I write this. I can't say just how many government and business leaders will ultimately skip or boycott the conference, which is held in the Saudi capital Riyadh, but I can tell you that the list of those who say they'll do so is growing by the hour. Right now that list includes Khosrowshahi, Google Cloud CEO Dianne Greene, AOL co-founder Steve Case, Apple chief design officer Jony Ive and, as of this morning, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin.¹⁰⁹ Power and pressure — both from within and outside technology corporations — can move even the mightiest of mountains if they are applied in the right way at the right time.

We must always use what power we have to bring about the change that is possible only when enough of us come together to make it happen. Working together we can exert the necessary influence upon our elected officials that results in the laws and regulations that make technology companies' policies and actions more ethical. They're really not going to regulate themselves, after all. In this present climate of deregulatory mania in which the president has appointed to every cabinet position and agency people who are inimical to the stated missions of their respective offices, we need regulation more than ever. The wild, Wild West of unregulated capitalism very well may lead to the collapse of civilization as we know it if left to its own devices and given license to run amok. This is no exaggeration; the two greatest threats facing humanity today — climate change, and nuclear war — are exacerbated, not mitigated, by corporate capitalism. The Trump administration pulled out of the Paris Climate Agreement; the agreement was a statement which was widely viewed as the world's best effort to combat global warming. Trump has also withdrawn the

US from key arms control agreements like the landmark Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia and the Iran nuclear deal, increasing the risk of nuclear combat.

As we continue to transition from the industrial to the information age, and from a manufacturing to a service economy, we will continue to see ethical challenges that we couldn't have imagined a few short years ago. Self-driving vehicles facing imminent crashes involving multiple vehicles or cars and pedestrians will effectively “choose” who lives or dies. Unmanned but definitely not unarmed drones controlled by 18-year-olds in air-conditioned bases in Nevada are raining death and destruction upon Islamist militants and innocent men, women, and children alike 8,000 miles away in Afghanistan. We're not going to stop the inevitable transition to autonomous vehicles and autonomous warfare, but there are bold moves we can and must make to bring a more ethical balance to technology. We've got to think BIG, dear reader. And what could be bigger than breaking up Amazon the way the government balkanized the once-mighty Bell Telephone monopoly back in the 1980s — during the archconservative Reagan administration, at that! Of course AT&T, one of the spinoff companies from that breakup, has gotten far too big and powerful in its own right, but breaking up Bell was one of the biggest and best deregulation efforts in modern history. It can serve as a model in our own time. This doesn't have to be a bad thing for Amazon, either; I would submit to Jeff Bezos that he would grow even richer if he were to break up the company. This is exactly what happened over a century ago when the government broke up Standard Oil into the “baby Standards,” chief among them Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, Amoco, and Marathon. That epic trust-bust created 34 separate companies, and Standard founder John D. Rockefeller continued to own significant equity in these. As each of them grew on their own, so too did the Rockefeller families' fortunes grow. Rockefeller was the richest man of his time; Bezos is the richest man of our time. Bezos would still be wealthy — and perhaps be even wealthier — if Amazon were split up.

Technology is a double-edged sword, with the power to both solve and create some of humanity's biggest problems. The same tech with which governments monitor their people can be used in positive ways. We rightfully lament the ubiquity of security cameras, but without cameras you wouldn't know that Jamal Khashoggi entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, or that Eric Garner was unjustly killed by New York police, or that US Army helicopters murdered a dozen innocent Iraqis (thanks, Chelsea Manning and WikiLeaks). Using technology for good, and making ethical decisions and changes within organizations, adds value. It's better for companies, it's better for their workers, and it's better for humanity. When tech companies truly understand that being ethical is best for their bottom line, I believe they'll be more inclined to do the right thing, if for no other reason than for the pure pursuit of profit. When all of us involved in tech — whether we be employees, consumers, partners, or other stakeholders — raise our voices against unethical policies and actions and demand more ethical behavior, positive change becomes not only possible today but also becomes one of tomorrow's best practices. It is my humble hope that this book will serve to gently push tech toward that better future.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mr. Razavi was formerly the CEO of cloud software startup BizCloud, He has more than 20 years of sales, operations and customer service experience in the software and customer service industry. Mr. Razavi has been a lifelong peace activist. In addition to his pro-peace and pro-human rights activism, after Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA's warrantless spying activities, he organized a set of 'NSA Comedy Nights' to raise awareness of domestic and international surveillance in violation of our civil liberties.

He's traveled extensively abroad and become familiar with the impacts of technology and big business on some developing countries, and is the author of *The Age of Nepotism*, which deals with life and culture in the Balkans during the last recession.

