

Outlook

Available Steering Wheel

One of my colleagues at Glenair is in the market for a new car and, unlike me, is genuinely interested in a self-driving or at least semi-autonomous vehicle. I suppose that someday climbing into an automobile with no operator will seem no different than say, climbing aboard a driverless metro train or—looking back even farther in time—into an elevator with no human operator. But one's outlook in life is unavoidably a product of experience and circumstance. Which is why our (okay, my) nervous system is anchored in a time and place where cars without steering wheels exist in nightmares, not out on the Southern California freeways.

Being in the interconnect industry, we get exposed to all kinds of next-generation technology—a great deal of which will be put to use to realize the dream of driverless cars. And yes, I accept that GPS, radar, LIDAR, sonar, and other sensing technologies will theoretically make such vehicles as safe as my toaster oven. But, (and here is the dilemma) there is a passage from Will Durant's *The Lessons of History* that has always informed my worldview; one I think everyone should bear in mind in their unbridled enthusiasm for radical new technology,

"Out of every hundred new ideas, ninety-nine or more will probably be inferior to the traditional responses which they propose to replace. So the conservative who resists change is as valuable as the radical who proposes it—perhaps much more as the roots are more vital than grafts. It is good that new ideas should be heard, for the sake of the few that can be used; but it is also good that new ideas should be compelled to go through the mill of objection, opposition, and contumely [Ed: ridicule]; for this is the trial heat which innovations must survive before being allowed to enter the human race".

I believe I've already used this forum to share the story of steam locomotive manufacturing in America, as a cautionary tale that we would be wise to observe in our own industry. The Reader's Digest version is that not one of the big three steam locomotive makers successfully transitioned to the manufacture of diesel locomotives. Instead, they stayed anchored in their comfort zone of producing steam-powered locos (this despite the clear fact that their customers preferred the new, lower-cost diesels). Ultimately, new entrants in the marketplace made the transition to diesel and ran the old companies out of business.

So there is the dilemma in a nutshell. Most successful organizations begin life with a healthy attitude towards change. But over time, circumstances and experience leave them so anchored in the past that they lose the ability to imagine any kind of future other than the one they know. Can't happen here? Don't bet on it. That's why I'm going to bite my tongue and climb into a driverless car as soon as they are available. I just hope they throw me a bone and put a steering wheel in it.

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