

Magaziner subscriptions

What's for lunch at the Internet public-policy conference? Oh boy, chicken! And who's the guest speaker? Oh no, not Ira Magaziner again! We had him last week, and the week before that. All they ever serve at these things anymore is Magaziner.

If you want to know the Clinton administration's policy about the Internet and electronic commerce, Magaziner's the guy you want. But how did he come to be the president's leading Internet adviser, anyway? Wasn't he the president's health-care adviser last time you looked?

In fact, Magaziner is not the only technology policy adviser in the Clinton White House. We've just gotten a new menu selection that, at the very least, is worth poking a fork into. The technology community should watch this closely because a change in advisers sometimes means a change of policy.

When Clinton first moved into the White House, Magaziner was charged with assisting the health-care reform effort. But in 1996, after Clinton's health-care proposal failed, Magaziner was out of a job. In business, losing your job usually means you give up your salary and staff, but not so in the Clinton White House. Instead, Magaziner looked around for something else to do. He tried international trade, only to discover that the people who get paid to do this don't think they need any help. So he set his sights on electronic commerce and found that most-abhorred of bureaucratic phenomena: a power vacuum. It was his for the asking.

It's easy to imagine the rest of the room breathing a sigh of relief

when Magaziner announced his new role to the White House senior staff because none of them claimed this area. None of them, that is, except Jack Gibbons, whom the Senate had confirmed as Assistant to the President for Science and Technology.

Gibbons is the prototypical honest, decent, guileless public servant. It's too bad these qualities are not more highly rewarded for White House staff members. Gibbons lacked a personal connection with the president or vice president, and his position gave him little leverage in government decisions.

Nevertheless, his accomplishments, with little more than White House fairy dust, are in some ways remarkable. Through the work Gibbons did for Clinton, Detroit is on its way to producing a low-emissions automobile by 2004 that will get 80 miles per gallon; the nation's nuclear stockpile will be managed with the help of qualified scientists; and the National Bioethics Advisory Commission may get to weigh in with actual knowledge before legislation on cloning is passed.

Gibbons recently resigned after five years, and it's striking that in his farewell there is nary a word about the Internet or electronic commerce among his accomplishments. There has been plenty of talk about these issues, but most of it has been happening around

Gibbons, rather than as a result of his initiative. In part, that's because Gibbons served under Vice President Gore, who held control over telecommunications reform and some other technology issues. It's also because Gibbons is not a computer guy.

President Clinton has announced

his intention to nominate Neal Lane, head of the National Science Foundation (NSF), as the new science adviser. There is some hope that Lane will pay more attention to Internet-related issues. For one thing, he cited computing research as an area to be accelerated if Congress goes along with the

president's request to increase the NSF budget. And he's been a key player in addressing the conflict regarding domain names.

But Lane also has many other items on his agenda. And a close personal friend of the president is already working on e-commerce-related issues, leaving Lane's role there in question.

Lane is trying to decide what he's going to work on. In addition, many other people with positions of responsibility at the White House are working on broader issues than just electronic commerce, such as the Internet and education. While Magaziner is a great luncheon choice, the Internet community shouldn't forget to sample some of the other fine selections, including Lane. ■

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David Lytel
(david@lytel.com) served in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy during President Clinton's first term. He runs Sherpa Consulting Group, an online business development agency.

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