Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

By: James Oliphant

The 'techlash' is here – and its implications for U.S. politics may be profound

As the classic rock anthem goes, “There’s something happening here. What it is ain’t exactly clear.”

Americans are mad. Fighting mad. And the object of their wrath is Big Tech, or more specifically, the tangible elements of Big Tech they actually can take on.

It started with data centers – the massive server complexes used to power AI development that soak up power and water. They’ve become a front-burner issue in the midterm elections, with Democrats and Republicans alike viewing them with rising skepticism.

Now, in just the last few weeks, there has been a visible groundswell of anger over mounted surveillance cameras in communities across the United States – AI-powered devices that are used to scan license plates, bumper stickers, the make and model of vehicles and can track their movements.

Much of the vitriol has been aimed at Flock Safety, the billion-dollar, Silicon Valley-backed company that manufactures the cameras and has contracts with municipalities nationwide. Critics say law enforcement agencies can search the national database without a warrant.

In Ohio, for example, residents in the town of Shaker Heights, just outside Cleveland, took to the streets last month in protest over its police department’s use of the cameras, holding aloft signs that read: FLOCK CAMERAS ARE WATCHING YOU and FLOCK = BIG BROTHER.

Lago Vista, a town outside Austin, Texas, terminated its Flock program after citizen complaints after the city of Austin itself suspended their use. The small town of Weston, Missouri (pop. 1,756) chose not to follow through with its plan to install Flock cameras after residents packed council meetings to complain.

And there have been more direct acts of protest: The box-like cameras have been repeatedly vandalized, smashed with bats or sawed off from poles.

Episodes of abuse of the system

As with many protest movements, resistance to the cameras happened slowly – and then seemingly all at once. Liberals became alarmed first over their reported use in tracking a Texas woman who had a self-managed abortion, then over how the data was being used to aid Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents track migrants.

Last year, the Illinois attorney general found that Flock had allowed federal agents access to its data in violation of state law.

But the real accelerant may have been reports by the Washington Post and other outlets detailing how police officers used the devices to stalk ex-girlfriends and engage in related misconduct.

The Post discovered instances involving at least 50 law-enforcement officers who used license-plate readers for unauthorized purposes, including to stalk women without consent.

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Law-enforcement agencies – and the company – have defended use of the devices as an important tool to fight crime, but pressure is growing from both the American left and right.

DeFlock, a nationwide advocacy group formed to combat the spread of the cameras, tracks their placement and offers tips on how citizens can get involved to stop them. Protestors staged a “National Week of Action” last month.

The group estimates that there are more than 137,000 license-plate readers active in the U.S. – and that 153 cities have rejected them.

The Institute for Justice, a libertarian civil-rights group that has brought more than a dozen cases before the U.S. Supreme Court,

says it has documented more than 180 episodes of abuse of the system, including romantic stalking, wrongful stops and detentions, and non-law enforcement use.

2026 or 1984?

Politicians are belatedly taking notice. The use of Flock cameras has become a major issue in the U.S. Senate race in Michigan, where Democrat Abdul El-Sayed has accused his Republican opponent, Mike Rogers, of supporting their use. El-Sayed has posted videos where he asks voters: "Do you feel like you're in a cage. . . . being watched?" El-Sayed has also been a prominent critic of data centers.

In Texas, a hotbed of anti-Flock activism, Republican Governor Greg Abbott, who is running for re-election, blocked funding for Flock cameras after his Democratic opponent, Gina Hinojosa, accused him of ignoring privacy concerns. "Welcome to Texas, y'all, where we celebrate freedom from big government," she says in a digital video spot. "So relax. There's only 10,000 Flock cameras reading your plate, logging where you sleep and pray. No warrant needed in Greg Abbott's Texas."

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Another Republican, Representative Keith Self, who is running for re-election to Congress, posted an ominous image on Instagram of a camera with the caption "2026 or 1984?"

In Ohio, Republican gubernatorial nominee Vivek Ramaswamy went even further with his rhetoric. "If the government is able to map out every movement you make – we're not there – but if you skate to where the puck is going, it's not hard to imagine a Chinese-style surveillance state," he said at a campaign event in July.

A still-mushrooming phenomenon

The shifting voter sentiments are notable not just because they could move the needle in this year's midterm races but in that they could possibly represent a sea change in the relationship between Big Tech and the public.

Since the turn of the century, the United States has gone through nothing less than a technological revolution, one that has resulted in the growth of social media, widespread WiFi, the collapse of traditional news outlets and, more recently, profound advancements in artificial intelligence.

At the same time, the 9/11 attacks fostered the growth of a national security state in which pervasive surveillance increasingly has appeared to be the norm, a bargain voters once appeared to be willing to strike in the name of personal safety.

While the days of viewing platforms such as Facebook and X as benign community spaces are long over, the level of antipathy being directed not only at those companies but at tech in general is a still-mushrooming phenomenon, one that analysts are trying to decipher.

You have a chance to act now, before unemployment rises sharply, communities are hurting and public trust has eroded - Bill Gates

Witness the $17 billion settlement Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, entered into last month over claims the site causes harm to teens and children. The

company agreed to a set of guardrails to limit access for minors.

The deal resolved a suit brought by more than 50 states and territories – and the $17 billion Meta may end up paying out could be a fraction of what it might have had to fork over after a trial.

That's because in March, a New Mexico jury socked Meta with a $375 million civil penalty for violating child protection laws. A judge later tacked on a $567 million abatement fund after determining Meta's platforms amounted to a public nuisance.

Meta's accord with the state came the same week as Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft, accused Big Tech firms in an online essay of downplaying the risks AI poses to jobs and society at large. Gates urged lawmakers to take action: "You have a chance to act now, before unemployment rises sharply, communities are hurting and public trust has eroded."

Being told this is the future

The Trump administration has struggled to find a regulatory approach that addresses AI-related security and economic concerns while giving tech companies the space to innovate and compete with China. And appetite in Congress for large-scale legislation appears to be limited – even among some Democrats.

Voters may be losing patience.

> Observers are trying to explain what some are calling a "techlash"

Observers are trying to explain what some are calling a "techlash." Scholars at the Brookings Institution posited last week that the pushback against data centers and the like is a result of a lack of "human agency over technology transformation."

In other words, we can't control when Google forces AI technology into our emails and search engines, but we can have some say in whether a data center is built in our town or AI-powered license-plate trackers are mounted along our highways. (And it doesn't help, the paper argues, that tech executives are among the wealthiest people on earth while income inequality and the cost of living remain fundamental challenges for the majority of Americans.)

But maybe it's even simpler than that. Maybe it's just that people are dog-tired of doomscrolling, endless pop-up targeted advertising, leaked personal data, sky-high energy bills, tracking apps, tone-deaf influencers, thousand-dollar phones and insecure employment – of being told this is the future and not having a say in what that looks like or who benefits from it.

Maybe the operative classic tune isn't "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield, but a more direct statement of purpose: Twisted Sister's immortal "We're Not Gonna Take It."