



# What Does The White House's AI Initiative Mean For The AV Industry?

Insights

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When President Trump signed [an executive order](#) on Monday to boost the role of artificial intelligence in the United States, the AV industry took yet another incremental—but not necessarily insignificant—step forward. While nowhere in the [10-page American AI Initiative](#) are autonomous vehicles mentioned, nor even the word transportation included, those in the industry took notice. What does the executive order mean for the AV industry?

## Overview

It's important to first understand what the American AI Initiative is—and what it isn't. Overall, its aim is to [boost our country's development of artificial intelligence](#) by directing federal agencies to prioritize AI in their research and development efforts. It also directs agencies to expand AI researchers' access to government information in a way that could aid the development of AI applications in the private sector. Specifically, the order requires all implementing federal agencies to consider AI as a priority and develop their FY2020 budget proposals with this in mind. It also pushes for [better reporting and tracking](#) on AI-related R&D.

The initiative also gears up agencies to take steps to better prepare workers for the potential impacts of AI, such as more effective training for displaced workers. "Experts say AI could upend many segments of the workforce, such as truck drivers, who could lose jobs to self-driving vehicles," [says the Wall Street Journal](#), echoing a refrain that is all-too common for those in the AV industry. Indeed, [the Reuters story](#) on the initiative also notes that AI advances are "set to trigger job displacements across industries."

But the initiative dedicates no specific federal dollars or resources to the effort. Instead, it passes the burden onto the agencies themselves to find appropriate money in their individual budgets to carry out the work. In some respects, then, the initiative can be seen as more of a vision statement than a specific action plan.

## What It Means For The AV Industry

As the [WSJ notes](#), "AI has the potential to revolutionize transportation..., creating so-called smart cities where traffic flows...are centrally coordinated." However, one of the hurdles identified by the order is the fact that AI—especially when deployed to aid the advancement of AV technology—is highly dependent on access to an enormous amount of data necessary to build effective algorithms.

In the case of AVs, the data-based algorithms are critical to enable computers to emulate human decision-making while driving.

This means that American companies are already in competition with overseas markets for developing this technology, and this order is intended to ensure that our country keeps pace with foreign competitors. As Axios points out, Beijing launched a “mammoth effort” two years ago to turn China into a “global torchbearer” in the field, and this week’s release appears to be a step in response. In fact, Wired notes that more than a dozen countries have already launched AI strategies in recent years, and so while the U.S. currently remains the world-leader in AI technology, there’s no time to rest of our laurels.

One result we can expect to see in the not-too-distant future is a wholesale revision of federal rules governing the transportation sector as they relate to AVs. The initiative calls for White House staff to work closely with regulators from the Department of Transportation, among others, to consider how AI technologies—such as autonomous vehicles—may require new regulations. We’ve been anticipating this for quite some time, and expect to see a renewed push for a new set of rules in 2019.

One of the ways this initiative could be a boon to the AV industry is if it leads to the building of a sustainable platform upon which the AV world could succeed. As the Brookings Institute points out, if the initiative is successful, it will lead to speedier broadband networks, more ubiquitous mobile networks, and faster computers. These developments will be crucial for the deployment of effective AI. “It will be impossible to take advantage of the full capabilities of AI without this type of progress,” the blog post states, as “advances in autonomous vehicles...require improvements in computing capacity.”

## Criticisms

Of course, nothing can happen in D.C. these days without an element of controversy. The digital ink on the executive order wasn’t even dry before criticism of the initiative popped up. For example:

- A common critique: as Axios notes, the initiative is “light on details and carries no resources to back it up.” Ditto the Brookings Institute: “Sometimes, new announcements such as the one formed to combat the opioid crisis have been introduced with great fanfare, but shown little impact. Without additional funding for research, workforce development, and infrastructure, the new initiative likely will fall flat.”
- Wendy R. Anderson, general manager for defense and national security at SparkCognition, an AI company, and former chief of staff to Defense Secretary Ash Carter, criticized the plan by saying, “If there’s no implementation plan behind the EO — with details, deadlines, and funding — then it may be worse than no EO at all.”
- Nikki Stevens, an Arizona State University researcher who studies software engineering ethics, faults the initiative for taking a “fear-based” approach to automation with respect to the retraining aspects. She was quoted in Fast Company as saying, “Framing AI as a technology that

...retraining support. She was quoted in a press conference, as saying, "Training for a technology that will take people's jobs is a disempowering and deterministic narrative. As [the government] moves to operationalize this, they have the freedom to position this instead as 'how do we limit AI to protect citizen jobs' rather than assuming that vast swaths of the working population will be displaced."

## **Conclusion**

This week's announcement is a step in the right direction, but it's just that—a step. It's said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. While the AV world has already ventured out and taken many significant steps, you can view the American AI Initiative as yet another step on this exciting journey.

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**Richard R. Meneghello**  
Chief Content Officer  
503.205.8044  
[Email](#)

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