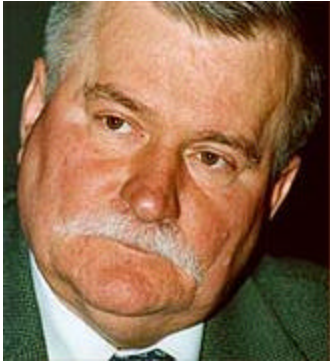


## Lech Walesa: Tech Freedom Fighter

By [Julia Scheeres](#)

2:00 a.m. June 19, 2002 PDT



Former Polish president Lech Walesa.

When former Polish president Lech Walesa pops into a chat room to discuss politics, people have a hard time believing they're debating issues with the man largely credited for the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe.

In a telephone conversation from his home in Gdansk, the former shipyard electrician turned Nobel Peace Prize winner spoke about government attempts to stifle technology or to use it to spy on personal communication.

Born the son of peasant farmers in 1943, the feisty politician started the Solidarity movement in 1980, which was pivotal in the defeat of communism throughout Eastern Europe. He was elected president of Poland in 1990, a post he held until 1995.

He recently joined the board of directors of [NuTech Solutions](#), a software company based in North Carolina. NuTech Solutions, which was launched by Polish-born Matthew Michalewicz, writes analytical software that predicts behavior and reduces spending.

**Wired News:** You've mentioned in past interviews that technology helped topple communism in Poland. Could you be more specific?

**Walesa:** Communism is a monopolistic system, economically and politically. The system suppresses individual initiative, and the 21st century is all about individualism and freedom. The development of technology supported these directions. When I was fighting communism, there was rapid development of satellite television and cell phones, and communism, to survive, would have to block all these information devices.

To control the free flow of information, the Communists would have to increase the secret police by a factor of four. It would be a huge effort for police to control the channels you get on TV or the phone numbers you are allowed to dial. So technology helped end communism by bringing in information from the outside. It was possible to get news from independent sources; stations like the BBC (British Broadcasting System) and VOA (Voice of America) were beyond government control. During '50s and '60s, the Communist government put people accused of listening to these stations in prison.

Only the minister of Internal Affairs was allowed to issue permits to get satellite TV, and clearly anyone against communism wouldn't get permission. Any equipment connected to processing information, even typewriters and copy machines, had to be registered at police stations.

Very often they searched apartments of people and confiscated equipment, even audio tapes. They once took 50 tapes from me -- some patriotic songs forbidden by

the Communists and interviews transmitted by the BBC and VOA as well as songs from the West. I still haven't gotten them back.

It's hard to believe that things like that actually happened from today's perspective.

**WN:** Cuba, for example, recently banned PC sales to the public and regularly censors satellite, Internet and phone connections to the island. Do you see parallels between the Polish experience and what's going on in Cuba?

**Walesa:** Cuba is one of the final countries in which communism is still alive. Their system is based on the same system that we had in Central Europe 20 years ago. Clearly Cuba has some advantages over Central Europe at the time because it is closer to the U.S. But communism in Cuba will collapse sooner or later because you can't control the free flow of information.

Communism prevents organizations from developing by stopping the flow of information. The system is based on police and listening devices and triggers the worst characteristics in humans. The communist system is basically finished, and Mr. Castro knows that. But his choice is very limited. He is living his final days, after him there will probably be no replacement. But communism destroyed all independent organizations, so it will be interesting to see what happens.

**WN:** Do you believe that the use of technology by democratic governments to spy on personal communications-using systems is any worse than totalitarian attempts to do the same?

**Walesa:** I believe that any violation of privacy is nothing good. But on the other hand, the government is responsible for the safety of the citizens of the country, so it has to protect them. I would distinguish between spying on the people in general and using the newest technologies to spy on the concrete people, or groups of people who might be dangerous for the society -- the society, not for the government, as the regime of the country. I strongly believe this is the situation we are facing in the democratic countries; that is why it is different from the Communist approach.

**WN:** Has the "tech revolution" benefited Poland?

**Walesa:** Definitely, the "tech revolution" has not influenced Poland in a way that would be meaningful for the economies of the U.S. or other Western countries. First, the high-tech companies haven't become as influential in our market as in the United States. Second, the development of (Poland) needs many other components; it is not just adding the benefits of the newest technologies on top of a well-organized and well-working economic system. I would say that it is most beneficial for the young people, meaning their education, chances for creating something new in the future. It influenced communication and information, so it is just a first step for us to be benefactors of the "tech" changes in the world.

**WN:** Do you consider yourself a technophile?

**Walesa:** Yes, I am a person interested in the development of technology. I use many different gadgets connected with computers; I use PCs, laptops and a Palm

Pilot. I also use the Internet to visit websites, especially within Polish-language Internet. I usually go to political discussion groups and sites -- of course, as I use my real name, people never believe that they are chatting with me!

**WN:** What is your role at NuTech Solutions and what projects does the company have in Poland?

**Walesa:** As a board member, I will be advising the management of the company and I will take part in creating the policy and strategy of NuTech. In addition to attending each of the company's board meetings, I am committed to providing a great deal of my time to helping NuTech in its promotion and continued growth and development.

It is no secret that (the Polish) economy is now a global economy in which smaller companies can better compete worldwide. NuTech has effectively integrated its top scientific and technology teams in Poland and the United States for a collaborative environment. This would have been very difficult ten years ago. But now companies such as NuTech can lead the way for other American companies to take advantage of the favorable business climate in Poland today.