

The Political Evolution of Domestic Spy Company Palantir CEO Alex Karp

A conversation with an author who had a six-year-long window into the most interesting MAGA conversion in Silicon Valley.

On Monday, in a [letter to shareholders](#) announcing \$476 million of profit in the third quarter of the year, Palantir CEO Alex Karp quoted the Irish poet W.B. Yeats: “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold.” It was a peculiar part of an even more peculiar letter, where he proceeded to warn against the dangers of “proclaim[ing] the equality of all cultures and cultural values.”

For Michael Steinberger, whose new book [*The Philosopher in the Valley: Alex Karp, Palantir, and the Rise of the Surveillance State*](#) chronicles Karp’s political evolution, the letter was not all that surprising, given Karp’s recent turn toward MAGA politics and his penchant for framing his own thoughts in the writing of 20th-century thinkers.

Karp, who has a PhD in neoclassical social theory, has long identified as a socialist and progressive. But over the course of the last decade, Karp has become an increasingly vocal supporter of Donald Trump and the right, expressing skepticism of immigration, support for unfettered AI development and a distaste for left-leaning protesters.

This transformation, which I called Steinberger to discuss, is particularly notable given the company Karp oversees. Palantir compiles and synthesizes vast amounts of data. The company has become hotly controversial under Trump because it has worked with U.S. agencies, including ICE, in their effort to expand their surveillance capabilities.

Karp’s Trumpy shift is hardly unique in Silicon Valley these days, but his politics remain idiosyncratic, and Steinberger thinks his evolution is about more than just flattering whichever political party is in power. All of that makes Karp and Palantir an interesting case study for understanding the roots of the MAGA drift in Big Tech, and whether it has limits.

“Karp is not going to say publicly where the red lines are,” Steinberger said. “But the thing that I think it’s fair to ask is, is there anything that could happen that would cause Karp to reconsider his work with ICE, or that even has implications on his broader work with the government?”

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

You reported this book for six years. How would you describe Alex Karp’s political evolution in that time?

When I first began talking to him in 2019, he identified as progressive, as a supporter of the Democrats. In six years of ongoing conversation, I would say he has drifted away from the Democrats and the left. I think he would say that the left left him, but clearly his politics have shifted.

During the first Trump presidency, he made very clear that he was not a fan of Donald Trump. He said it publicly, he said it privately, but it was also a time when Palantir, because of its work with ICE, was

being subjected to protests. He was quite angry about that. He thought Palantir was being unfairly singled out by activists, when other tech companies were working with ICE as well. And he also felt that Trump had won in large part because of immigration, and the point he made to me and others back in 2019 and before then, was: People don't like illegal immigration, and Democrats and progressives don't take their concerns seriously. They will turn to people who do take their concerns seriously, and that's why Trump was elected. So already, you can see a falling out with the left.

He also thought that what he saw as the left's fixation with identity politics was toxic. He thought that was very harmful for Democrats politically and harmful for the country. So that was another point of departure for him. And then I think October 7 kind of cemented his break with the Democrats and the left. Even though he wrote checks to Joe Biden in 2024 and he was willing to continue to support Biden, his sense was that the left was not just expressing anti-Zionist views, but was indulging antisemitism.

Do you doubt anything about the story that Karp tells himself about his political evolution?

I think he was a self-styled progressive. He defined progressive as he wanted to define it. He had views that I think were fairly characterized as progressive, and still does. He has spoken directly about the problem of economic inequality in this country, which other billionaires are not as willing to acknowledge. I think he is still supportive of the idea of universal health care.

But even 10 years ago, there were ways in which he deviated from a progressive orthodoxy.

He was against affirmative action. He is a Second Amendment enthusiast. Even then, he had heterodox views. It would be much harder now for him to plausibly claim that he's a progressive, and I think he's largely gone silent about that. And still, even though he's not calling himself a conservative, he spends a lot of his time beating up on the left, in a way that suggests that in his mind, there has been a divorce [between him and the left].

Watch: The Conversation

Play Video

2:37

[Mikie Sherrill reacts to her election victory](#)

It seems like Karp's politics — though they have shifted right in a similar way — actually are more idiosyncratic than your average Silicon Valley founder's. How is his political evolution different from his peers'?

I think you hit upon an important point. With some of these guys, certainly in this current moment, the cravenness drips off of them like sweat. Karp is a little different, which probably is connected to his background. He's trained in the humanities. He's a credentialed scholar. He holds a PhD. He knows history, he knows politics. His views are subtle in many cases. They're well informed in a way that I think is not necessarily apparent in other tech executives who comment a lot about our politics and whose politics seem to have evolved.

Part of what is interesting about Karp in this moment is that — look, he went to Germany [for his PhD] in part because he wanted to understand why Germany, this pillar of civilization, descended into such barbarism [during the Third Reich]. That's a very personal thing. His family had been affected by the Holocaust. But he also wanted to understand at an intellectual level why this happened. He does his dissertation on what effectively amounts to the rhetoric of fascism. He can talk about this stuff with some expertise and fluency that other people can't, and so it makes him a much more interesting figure than some of these tech bros, if you will.

I think he knows that some of the rhetoric we've heard in recent years has unfortunate historical analogues. He knows this. He knows this in part because he studied the rhetoric of fascism. Now, he doesn't believe that this rhetoric is leading to the same outcome here. That's his view. And some people will agree with him, some people will disagree, but his training, his background, makes him certainly a much more interesting figure than a lot of these other guys, and maybe even more of a lightning rod than some others.

It seems like there's a European flavor to a lot of his politics.

Yeah. I mean, for instance, he's always dumping on the Democrats. I said to him years ago, "All you ever do is dump on the Democrats. I never hear any similar critique of the right." He said, "Well, it's a sort of a German thing where you just interrogate your own ideas." You beat the crap out of your own side, your own ideas. You interrogate them relentlessly. So, he does have a sort of European sensibility.

Does Palantir's increased work with the government on these potential surveillance programs concern you?

Karp says I suffer from TDS — Trump Derangement Syndrome — which is his way of saying, "I don't really want to talk about the aspects of Trump that you want to talk about." He wants to talk about the stuff that he likes, the policies that he approves of. He doesn't want to talk about this other stuff. I think he would also say, in a more serious vein, that he thinks concerns are overblown. He believes that judicial independence is being upheld, that the courts are, as they did in the first Trump presidency, providing an obstacle for this administration. I think, though, it has to be recognized that Palantir is a very powerful technology.

There are a lot of misconceptions about Palantir. It is important to recognize that they do not collect data, they do not store data and they definitely don't sell data. It is software that enables organizations to make better use of their own data. So, it's important to understand that about Palantir, and at the same time, it also has to be recognized that at the end of the day, it's the end user who determines how rigorously or not to use safety controls built into the platform. And so that's always been the risk, and that's a risk on the corporate side and it's a risk on the government side.

I would say, though, that you know, in the context of the current moment, the question really isn't do you trust Alex Karp and Palantir with your data? The question is, do you trust Donald Trump and Stephen Miller with your data? And how you answer that question will determine how you feel about the work that Palantir is doing.

In the book, you describe the internal dissent in the company with regard to working with ICE. How do you square many of Karp's [comments over the years about concern with Trump](#) with some of the work that Palantir is doing, which often includes working directly with ICE?

In the first Trump presidency, Karp made very clear that he wasn't enthusiastic about Trump's immigration policy. He said that personally he was not in favor of illegal immigration, he thought it was a problem, he thought enforcement on the border was a problem. But he told me in 2019, "I am perfectly fine with the demographics of this country changing, and I don't agree with Trump on many things. And his immigration policy is one of them."

At the time, Palantir [made the point](#) that they were working with a branch of ICE that was not rounding up people. That explanation fell apart when [it turned out that branch had been involved in some of the raids in the first Trump presidency](#).

Karp's stated position on immigration put him at odds with Trump and at odds with his Palantir co-founder and longtime friend Peter Thiel. But Karp still said that [Palantir had a contract with ICE, and they had duties to fulfill that contract](#), even if he didn't personally agree with the policy. His point was that you can't just pick and choose what work you're willing to do based on whether you like the president or not, and that to have walked away from the work with ICE, to have terminated the contract, would have been Palantir effectively exercising a veto over the American voter, and he wasn't willing to do that.

This time around, he's making no apologies for the work with ICE. He told me he believes most voters determined that they want the demographics of the country to basically remain the same.

He was fine with internal protests in the first Trump administration at Palantir, because the company has always had a lot of in-house debate, and that's something Karp thinks has been critical to their success. In the second Trump administration, that criticism has been a bit more muted, in part because the job market is worse. That's an internal check on dissent, because it's not so easy to go somewhere else if you're unhappy with the direction of the company.

You write in your book about how [Palantir has designs on becoming the operating system of the U.S. government](#). What would that require?

Palantir spent years trying to break in with the military. They ended up having to sue the Army in 2016 for the right to bid on a battlefield intelligence program for the military. They won that battle, and that opened the floodgates to becoming a major defense contractor. Now, they're getting lots of contracts still, but the Pentagon is, if anything, thinking they might have too many Palantir contracts — that they need to spread things out.

I think part of the reason that Karp is on board with Trump is that he sees a huge opportunity here. Palantir's software is already widely used, obviously on the military side, but [the Trump administration] is an opportunity to become even more deeply entrenched. I think that was certainly part of the motivation for getting involved with DOGE — Palantir helped build [products for the IRS](#) and [a database to surveil and track immigrants](#) — as they did.

But the risks here are, they are working in areas that right now are causing a lot of concern — the work with ICE and where things are going on that front. So, I don't know that there are roadblocks so much as there are concerns about where policy is going and how policy is being enforced. Their work is already controversial, but could become even more so.

Karp is not going to say publicly where the red lines are. But the thing that I think it's fair to ask is, is there anything that could happen that would cause Karp to reconsider his work with ICE, or that even has implications on the broader work with the government?

As Silicon Valley embraces its libertarian roots, is there some concern about Palantir from that political orientation as well?

I think certainly, if you're a true libertarian, you would not like the idea of the government merging all these data silos, creating something approximating a master database of personal information on all Americans. And as a number of people have said, as DOGE was ransacking the federal bureaucracy [and using Palantir software to help do so], it was gaining access to data that it wasn't authorized to have. You had people who worked in government for years saying, "Look, this stuff was kept segregated, not because we wanted government to operate less efficiently, but because it was understood that the government has a lot of information on Americans and can't always assume that every person working in government is a good actor." Information was kept siloed for a very deliberate reason to make it harder for bad actors to do bad things.

The argument you hear from Palantir and others is that this is all just work to make the government more efficient. They don't want to talk about this in the context of Trump's presidency, but I don't see how you can not talk about it in the context of Trump's presidency. He ran for the presidency in 2024 in large part on a vow to gain retribution against his enemies. And I think there are legitimate concerns that the data may be misused as part of his agenda. I think many people would say he's weaponizing the government against his opponents. I mean, you had Stephen Miller after Charlie Kirk's assassination saying that they're going to go after progressive organizations like they are domestic terrorists. Is Palantir going to be used for that?

You can't ignore the fact that Trump has made it very clear that he wants to weaponize the government against his enemies. And data can help do that.

Filed Under:

- [Silicon Valley](#)
- [Data](#)
- [Donald Trump](#)
- [Peter Thiel](#)
- [Data privacy](#)