

Palantir Spies On Citizens For Politicians

Palantir is arguably one of the [most notorious](#) corporations in contemporary America. Cofounded by libertarian tech billionaire Peter Thiel, the software firm's work [with Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), the US [Department of Defense](#), and the [Israeli military](#) has sparked [numerous protests](#) in [multiple countries](#). Palantir has been so infamous for so long that, for some people, its name has become a cultural shorthand for dystopian surveillance.

But a number of former Palantir employees tell WIRED they believe the public still largely misunderstands what the company actually does and how its software works. Some people think it's a data broker that buys information from private companies and resells it to the government. Others think it's a data miner, constantly scanning the internet for unique insights it can collect and market to customers. Still others think it maintains a giant, centralized database of information collected from all of its clients. In reality, Palantir does none of these things, but the misconceptions continue to persist.

Palantir has tried to correct the record itself in a series of blog posts with titles like "[Palantir Is Not a Data Company](#)" and "[Palantir Is Still Not a Data Company](#)." In the latter, Palantir explains that "misconceptions can arise because our products are complicated," but nonetheless, "it is absolutely possible" to accurately describe them to "people who are curious."

The problem, however, is that even ex-employees struggle to provide a clear description of the company. "It's really hard to explain what Palantir works on or what it does," says Linda Xia, who was an engineer at Palantir from 2022 to 2024. "Even as someone who worked there, it's hard to figure out, how do you give a cohesive explanation?"

Xia was one of 13 former Palantir staffers who signed an [open letter](#) published in May arguing that the company risks being complicit in authoritarianism by continuing to cooperate with the Trump administration. She and other former Palantir staffers who spoke to WIRED for this story argue that, in order to grapple with Palantir and its role in the world, let alone hold the company accountable, you need to first understand what it really is.

It's not that former employees literally *don't know* what Palantir is selling. In interviews with WIRED, they spoke fluidly about how its software can connect and transform different kinds of data collected by government agencies and corporations. But when asked to, say, name its direct business competitors, two former Palantir employees who requested anonymity to speak freely about their experiences, struggled to come up with anything. "I still don't know how to answer that question, to be honest," says one.

Juan Sebastián Pinto, who worked as a content strategist at Palantir and also signed the open letter, says it sells software to other businesses, a category commonly referred to in Silicon Valley as B2B SaaS. Another former staffer says Palantir provides "really extravagant plumbing with data."

Xia calls Foundry, one of Palantir's flagship software platforms, "a collection of different applications" that customers use to "operationalize data." A fourth ex-employee dubbed Foundry a "super-charged

filing cabinet.” While all of these descriptions are technically accurate, they could also apply to products from hundreds of other tech companies. So what sets Palantir apart?

Part of the answer may lie in Palantir’s marketing strategy. Pinto says he believes that the company, which recently began using the tagline “software that dominates,” has cultivated its mysterious public image on purpose. Unlike consumer-facing startups that need to clearly explain their products to everyday users, Palantir’s main audience is sprawling government agencies and Fortune 500 companies.

What it’s ultimately selling them is not just software, but the idea of a seamless, almost magical solution to complex problems. To do that, Palantir often uses the language and aesthetics of warfare, painting itself as a powerful, quasi-military intelligence partner. “Palantir is here to disrupt and make the institutions we partner with the very best in the world,” Palantir CEO Alexander Karp says in a February 2025 [earnings call](#), “And when it’s necessary, to scare enemies, and on occasion, kill them.”

Palantir sends its employees to work inside client organizations essentially as consultants, helping to customize their data pipelines, troubleshoot problems, and fix bugs. It calls these workers “forward deployed software engineers,” a term that appears to be inspired by the concept of [forward-deployed troops](#), who are stationed in adversarial regions to deter nearby enemies from attacking.

A former Palantir employee tells WIRED that the company also has code words for certain job titles—like “Delta” for a forward deployed engineer, and “Echo” for Palantir’s version of a product manager—which they say are sourced from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s [phonetic alphabet](#) of code words meant for use over military radio.

A different former employee tells WIRED that Palantir staffers will often use [the military term](#) “FYSA,” or “for your situational awareness,” instead of “FYI.” Many Palantir emails, they say, also begin with “BLUF:” or “bottom line up front,” followed by a short summary of key details or events. (It’s essentially the [military equivalent](#) of “TLDR,” or “too long didn’t read.”) The ex-staffer says this jargon can be traced back to Palantir’s first clients, which [included](#) US intelligence and military agencies.

But arguably Palantir’s most recognizable jargon is borrowed from the *Lord of the Rings* universe. The company’s name is a reference to J.R.R. Tolkien’s “palantíri,” magical stones that can be used to communicate, see faraway places, and observe moments from the past and future.

Palantir’s employees are also sometimes [called](#) “[hobbits](#).” According to one former employee, a common internal motto in Palantir’s early days was “Save the Shire,” a reference to the hobbit homeland, which they say was a rallying cry that reflected the company’s ethos at the time.

“It was all about ‘Save the Shire’ and do good for the war fighters,” the ex-staffer says. “It was all about, really, we are going in and solving hard problems.”

In response to a detailed request for comment from WIRED, Palantir spokesperson Lisa Gordon said in a statement that the company is “proud to support the US government, especially our warfighters,” and that it has never wavered from its founding mission “to support the West and empower the world’s

most important institutions.” Gordon added that the open letter criticizing Palantir was only signed by a small portion of the company’s approximately 8,000 employees and alumni.

Got a Tip?

Are you a current or former Palantir employee who wants to talk about what's happening? We'd like to hear from you. Using a nonwork phone or computer, contact the reporter securely on Signal at [carolinehaskins.61](#).

Dawn of Big Data

Underneath the jargon and marketing, Palantir sells tools that its customers—corporations, nonprofits, government agencies—use to sort through data. What makes Palantir different from other tech companies is the scale and scope of its products. Its pitch to potential customers is that they can buy one system and use it to replace perhaps a dozen other dashboards and programs, according to a 2022 [analysis](#) of Palantir’s offerings published by blogger and data engineer Ben Rogojan.

Crucially, Palantir doesn’t reorganize a company's bins and pipes, so to speak, meaning it doesn’t change how data is collected or how it moves through the guts of an organization. Instead, its software sits on top of a customer’s messy systems and allows them to integrate and analyze data without needing to fix the underlying architecture. In some ways, it’s a technical band-aid. In theory, this makes Palantir particularly well suited for government agencies that may use state-of-the-art software cobbled together with programming languages dating back to the 1960s.

Palantir began [gaining steam](#) in the 2010s, a decade when corporate business discourse was dominated by the rise of “[Big Data](#).” Hundreds of tech startups popped up promising to disrupt the market by leveraging information that was now readily available thanks to smartphones and internet-connected sensors, including everything from global shipping patterns to the social media habits of college students. The hype around Big Data [put pressure](#) on companies, especially legacy brands without sophisticated technical know-how, to upgrade their software, or else risk looking like dinosaurs to their customers and investors.

But it’s not exactly easy or cheap to upgrade computer systems that may date back years, or even decades. Rather than tearing everything down and building anew, [companies may want a solution](#) designed to be slapped on top of what they already have. That’s where Palantir comes in.

Palantir’s software is designed with nontechnical users in mind. Rather than relying on specialized technical teams to parse and analyze data, Palantir allows people across an organization to get insights, sometimes without writing a single line of code. All they need to do is log into one of Palantir’s two primary platforms: Foundry, for commercial users, or Gotham, for law enforcement and government users.

The Sales Pitch

Foundry focuses on helping businesses use data to do things like manage inventory, monitor factory lines, and track orders. Gotham, meanwhile, is an investigative tool specifically for police and government clients, designed to connect people, places, and events of interest to law enforcement. There's also Apollo, which is like a control panel for shipping automatic software updates to Foundry or Gotham, and the Artificial Intelligence Platform, a suite of AI-powered tools that can be integrated into Gotham or Foundry.

Foundry and Gotham are similar: Both ingest data and give people a neat platform to work with it. The main difference between them is what data they're ingesting. Gotham takes any data that government or law enforcement customers may have, [including things](#) like crime reports, booking logs, or information they collected by subpoenaing a social media company. Gotham then extracts every person, place, and detail that might be relevant. Customers need to already have the data they want to work with—Palantir itself does not provide any.

A former Palantir staffer who has used Gotham says that, in just minutes, a law enforcement official or government analyst can map out who may be in a person's network and see documents that link them together. They can also centralize everything an agency knows about a person in one place, including their eye color from their driver's license, or their license plate from a traffic ticket—making it easy to build a detailed intelligence report. They can also use Gotham to search for a person [based on a characteristic](#), like their immigration status, what state they live in, or whether they have tattoos.

The sales pitch for tools like Foundry and Gotham is that they can transcend all of the challenges associated with storing and structuring data, and naturally bring investigations and business decisionmakers to the correct solution. With an objectively superior technology, the thinking goes, the best possible outcomes will follow.

A version of this logic pervades the internal culture at Palantir. When asked what distinguishes it from other tech companies, former employees consistently mentioned its “flat” staffing structure. Engineers can laterally move to more prestigious or challenging projects if they prove worthy based on their skills and connections. One former staffer tells WIRED that this made the company feel like a meritocracy where the best people, and the best ideas, naturally rise to the top.

Some former employees say that Palantir's meritocratic culture helped cultivate a sense of loyalty among staff. But they also believe that this can make it difficult to speak out against the company or its business decisions. (Gordon said that Palantir “prides itself on a culture of fierce internal dialog and disagreement on difficult issues related to our work.”)

During her time at Palantir, Xia says she worked exclusively with private businesses using Foundry. However, she felt a nagging discomfort about the military work happening in other parts of the organization. “I did the thing that I think a lot of people do,” Xia says, “which is, I just didn't engage with it.”

Since leaving Palantir, Pinto says he's spent a lot of time reflecting on the company's ability to parse and connect vast amounts of data. He's now deeply worried that an authoritarian state could use this

power to “tell any narrative they want” about, say, immigrants or dissidents it may be seeking to arrest or deport. He says that software like Palantir’s doesn’t eliminate human bias.

People are the ones that choose how to work with data, what questions to ask about it, and what conclusions to draw. Their choices could have positive outcomes, like ensuring enough [Covid-19 vaccines](#) are delivered to vulnerable areas. They could also have devastating ones, like launching a [deadly airstrike](#), or [deporting someone](#).

In some ways, Palantir can be seen as an amplifier of people’s intentions and biases. It helps them make evermore precise and intentional decisions, for better or for worse. But this may not always be obvious to Palantir’s users. They may only experience a sophisticated platform, sold to them using the vocabulary of warfare and hegemony. It may feel as if objective conclusions are flowing naturally from the data. When Gotham users connect disparate pieces of information about a person, it could seem like they are reading their whole life story, rather than just a slice of it.

“It’s a really powerful tool,” says one former Palantir employee. “And when it’s in the wrong hands, it can be really dangerous. And I think people should be really scared about it.”