

Peter Thiel's Palantir poses a grave threat to Americans

Robert Reich

Draw a circle around all the assets in the US now devoted to **artificial intelligence**.

Draw a second circle around all the assets devoted to the **US military**.

A third around all assets being devoted to helping the **Trump regime** collect and compile personal information on millions of Americans.

And a fourth circle around the parts of Silicon Valley dedicated to turning the US away from a democracy into a dictatorship led by tech bros.

Where do the four circles intersect?

Six arrested at protest of Palantir, tech company building deportation software for Trump admin

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At a corporation called Palantir Technologies and a man named **Peter Thiel**.

In JRR Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings, a "palantír" is a seeing stone that can be used to distort truth and present selective visions of reality. During the War of the Ring, a palantír falls under the control of Sauron, who uses it to manipulate and deceive.

Palantir Technologies bears a striking similarity. It sells an AI-based platform that allows its users – among them, military and law enforcement agencies – to analyze personal data, including social media profiles, personal information and physical characteristics.

These are used to identify and surveil individuals.

In March, Trump signed an executive order requiring all agencies and departments of the federal government to **share data on Americans**. To get the job done, Trump chose Palantir Technologies.

Palantir is now **poised to combine** data gleaned from the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, the Department of Health and Human Services,

the Social Security Administration and the Internal Revenue Service. Meanwhile, the administration wants access to citizens' and others' bank account numbers and medical claims.

Will the Trump regime use an emerging super-database to advance Trump's political agenda, find and detain immigrants, and punish critics? Will it make it easier for Trump to spy on and target his ever-growing list of enemies and other Americans? We'll soon find out.

Thirteen former Palantir employees **signed a letter** this month urging the corporation to stop its work with Trump.

Linda Xia, who was a Palantir engineer until last year, said the problem was not with the company's technology but with how the Trump administration intended to use it.

"Combining all that data, even with the noblest of intentions, significantly increases the risk of misuse," she **told the New York Times**.

Even some Republicans are concerned. Representative Warren Davidson, a Republican of Ohio, **told Semafor** such work could be "dangerous": "When you start combining all those data points on an individual into one database, it really essentially creates a digital ID. And it's a power that history says will eventually be abused."

Last week, a group of Democratic lawmakers **sent a letter to Palantir**, asking for answers about huge government contracts the company got. The lawmakers are worried that Palantir is helping make a super-database of Americans' private information.

Behind their worry lie several people who are behind Palantir's selection for the project, starting with Elon Musk.

Musk's so-called "department of government efficiency" (Doge) **was behind Palantir's selection**. At least three Doge members had worked at Palantir, the Times reported, while others had worked at companies funded by Peter Thiel, an investor and a founder of Palantir, who still holds a major stake in it.

Thiel has worked closely with Musk, who devoted a quarter of a billion dollars to getting Trump re-elected and then, as head of Doge, helped eviscerate swaths of the government without congressional authority.

Thiel also mentored JD Vance, who worked for Thiel at one of his venture funds. Thiel subsequently bankrolled Vance's 2022 senatorial campaign. Thiel introduced Vance to Trump and later **helped Vance become** his vice-presidential pick.

Thiel also mentored the billionaire David Sacks, who also worked with Thiel at PayPal. As a student at Stanford University, Sacks wrote for the Stanford Review, the rightwing student newspaper Thiel founded as an undergraduate there in 1987. Sacks is now Trump's "AI and crypto czar".

The CEO of Palantir is Alex Karp, who **said on an earnings call** earlier this year that the company wants "to disrupt and make the institutions we partner with the very best in the world and, when it's necessary, to scare enemies and on occasion kill them".

Palantir recently disclosed that Karp received **\$6.8bn** in "compensation actually paid" in 2024 (you read that right) – making him the **highest-paid chief executive** of a publicly traded company in the United States.

A former generation of wealthy US conservatives backed candidates like Barry Goldwater because they wanted to *conserve* American institutions.

But this group – Thiel, Musk, Sacks, Karp and Vance, among others – doesn't seem to want to conserve much of anything, at least not anything that occurred after the 1920s, including social security, civil rights and even women's right to vote.

As Thiel **has written**:

The 1920s were the last decade in American history during which one could be genuinely optimistic about politics. Since 1920, the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women – two constituencies that are notoriously tough for libertarians – have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron.

Hello?

If "capitalist democracy" is becoming an oxymoron, it's not because of public assistance or because women got the right to vote. It's because billionaire capitalists like Musk and Thiel are intent on killing democracy.

Not incidentally, the 1920s marked the last gasp of the Gilded Age, when America's robber barons ripped off so much of the nation's wealth that the rest of the US had to go deep into debt both to maintain their standard of living and to maintain overall demand for the goods and services the nation produced.

When that debt bubble burst in 1929, we got the Great Depression. Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler then emerged to create the worst threats to freedom and democracy the modern world had ever witnessed.

If the US learned anything from the first Gilded Age and the fascism that grew like a cancer in the 1930s, it should have been that gross inequalities of income and wealth fuel abuses of political power – as Trump, Musk, Thiel, Karp and other oligarchs have put on full display – which in turn generate strongmen who destroy both democracy and freedom.

The danger inherent in Palantir's AI-powered super-database on all Americans is connected to the vast wealth and power of those associated with the corporation, and their apparent disdain for democratic institutions.

Had you walked to the end of Trump's military-birthday parade and gazed above the president's reviewing stand, you'd have seen on a giant video board an advertisement for Palantir – one of the chief sponsors of the event.

Tolkien's palantír fell under the control of Sauron. Thiel's Palantir is falling under the control of Trump. How this story ends is up to all of us.

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