

Social Spy Agency Palantir's growing role in the Trump administration

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Palantir is a mysterious and powerful data analytics firm co-founded by tech billionaire Peter Thiel. In the Trump White House, the company is gaining new influence.

JUANA SUMMERS, HOST:

It's not a household name, but its power is immense - Palantir. For years, the surveillance company has done work for the Pentagon and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and now it's expecting a boom in the second Trump administration. NPR's Bobby Allyn takes a closer look at the rise of Palantir.

BOBBY ALLYN, BYLINE: Palantir CEO Alex Karp couldn't contain his excitement. He was on an earnings call with investors earlier this year. Palantir's profits were soaring.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

ALEX KARP: We're doing it. We're doing it. And I'm sure you're enjoying this as much as I am.

ALLYN: Karp and investors have a lot to enjoy. Palantir - the name comes from the seeing stones from "Lord Of The Rings" - has been booming. It's gone from a \$50 billion company last April to now being worth nearly 300 billion. For context, that's bigger than Verizon and Disney. Cofounded by billionaire Peter Thiel after the September 11 attacks, Palantir has spent years quietly landing huge contracts with intelligence agencies and governments in the U.S. and abroad. Most big tech companies downplay their military work. But Palantir's Alex Karp, he brags about it.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

KARP: Palantir is here to disrupt and make our - the institutions we partner with the very best in the world and, when it's necessary, to scare our enemies and, on occasion, kill them.

ALLYN: While the company is famously closely guarded, it has lifted the veil occasionally on the kind of work it does. Palantir's AI software is used by the Israel Defense Forces to strike targets in Gaza. It's used to assist the Department of Defense to analyze drone footage. And it's now helping the Trump administration with immigration enforcement. ICE records show Palantir recently received a \$30 million contract to build a platform to track migrant movements in real time. As its power grows, a former employee is speaking out - something exceedingly rare for the secretive firm.

JUAN SEBASTIAN PINTO: Palantir has built its brand and its reputation throughout all these years, and ability to deflect a lot of criticism, because they've claimed to be a company that supports Western values.

ALLYN: That's Juan Sebastian Pinto. He helped market Palantir products, including the systems behind what's known as kill chains - AI-driven networks that help identify targets on battlefields. He's also sold Palantir surveillance tools to governments.

PINTO: What I really was doing is basically helping a company create a monopoly over artificial intelligence decision-making and do so first by targeting the federal government.

ALLYN: And he says the federal government was an easy target for business since its software capabilities lag far behind Palantir's. Palantir declined NPR's request for comment, but the company has justified its contracts in the past by saying it is nonpartisan, having worked across multiple administrations. Michael McGrath is not surprised Palantir is getting a lot of work in the Trump administration. He used to be the CEO of data analytics firm, i2. It's a Palantir competitor.

MICHAEL MCGRATH: They could pull together information from tax returns, employment information, their immigration status, you know, how many children they

have, whether their children are legal or illegal. That could be a big asset. You know, it could also be a big risk.

ALLYN: The risks, Pinto says, should be the focus, which is why he says it's important as a former employee to shed light on how the company's products actually work.

PINTO: I simply cannot live in a world where my grandchildren have to be processed through a database where their everyday activities, including social media posts, as citizens are tracked, collected and used for an authoritarian government's policing database.

ALLYN: He admits that he grappled for a while with whether he should publicly criticize the company.

PINTO: As a former employee, I'm not even sure about my personal safety in regards to speaking out.

ALLYN: Other Palantir employees have wanted to warn about how the company's technology can be abused by governments, but he says they are under legal agreements to stay silent. Bobby Allyn, NPR News.