

The Palantir Spy Problem?

By

Steve Contorno

In a recent conversation, Vice President JD Vance asked Roger Stone, President Donald Trump's longtime confidant, for his biggest concern facing the country. Stone later recalled on his radio show that his answer was a technology company Vance now hears about with increasing frequency: **Palantir**.

For years, Democrats have zeroed in on Vance's relationship with Palantir's co-founder Peter Thiel, the iconoclastic tech titan who gave Vance one of his first jobs and later put \$15 million behind his successful 2022 Ohio Senate bid.

But the pressure on Vance is now coming from inside Trump's coalition. As the administration steers billions of dollars of new work to Palantir, prominent voices have expressed fears that the firm's powerful data analytics tools could give the government sweeping, almost futuristic surveillance capabilities. MAGA architect Steve Bannon has likened Palantir to a sci-fi villain while comedian Joe Rogan called the company "creepy" on his top-ranked podcast.

The rising unease has put Vance on the defensive. At an October gathering of young conservatives at the University of Mississippi, he bristled at "this internet meme out there that somehow I am super in bed with Palantir" when the company's name surfaced.

"Palantir is a private company," Vance added. "They sometimes do a useful service, and sometimes they're going to do things that we don't like."

Since rising to the national scene, Vance has served as a bridge between the GOP's populist wing and the tech world he once occupied as a

venture capitalist and biotech executive. He joined the Republican ticket last year with the backing of Bannon and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, but also with the expectation he could convince his Silicon Valley allies to open their wallets for the campaign.

Vance pleads for 'patience' on the economy in sharp departure from Trump's rhetoric Palantir's emergence as an unlikely flashpoint comes amid a growing divide within the party over Trump's alliance with billionaire technology entrepreneurs. The tensions underscore the challenge ahead for Vance as he takes a leading role in helping to hold together Trump's movement — a task with clear implications for his own political ambitions.

Vance's office did not respond to a request for comment. A spokesperson for Palantir pointed CNN to a lengthy statement the company published in June, which seeks to rebut what it describes as "recurrent misconceptions" about its operations.

"We are not a surveillance company," the statement reads. "We do not sell personal data of any kind. We don't provide data-mining as a service."

A contracting behemoth

Founded two decades ago with a funding boost from American intelligence agencies, Palantir has become a go-to contractor for governments and businesses confronting enormous and complex data problems. Federal agencies, local police departments and foreign militaries increasingly rely on its software and AI models, but so do aerospace companies, hospitals and the makers of a pickleball paddle.

Palantir's government portfolio grew during Trump's first term and expanded further under President Joe Biden. CEO Alex Karp backed Democrat Kamala Harris for president, but like many of his tech peers, he quickly pivoted after Trump won.

Palantir co-founder and CEO Alex Karp speaks during the Hill & Valley Forum at the US Capitol Visitor Center Auditorium, in Washington, DC, on April 30
(Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images)

A month after the election, Karp contributed \$1 million to the leading pro-Trump super PAC. Around the same time, Palantir ads appeared over Trump and Vance's box at the Army-Navy football game, and the company is among the donors to Trump's new White House ballroom. Jacob Helberg, a former adviser to Karp, is **now a top official in the State Department**.

Skeptical MAGA activists noticed. Far-right influencer Laura Loomer **accused the firm** last year of trying to "infiltrate" the incoming administration to secure defense contracts.

Nearly every week, another US agency assigns lucrative new work to Palantir. In recent months, the company has been hired by the Department of Homeland Security to vet "wedding-based schemes," by the Department of Veteran Affairs to track statistics, by the Internal Revenue Service to help cut costs and by the State Department to identify threats to Americans and US diplomats overseas, according to federal contracting data. Palantir's tools have supported some of Trump's most contentious priorities, including DOGE's push to downsize government and the **administration's immigration crackdown**.

The dozens of contracts awarded to Palantir since Trump took office can be measured in billions of dollars — **including a decade-long deal with the US Army worth up to \$10 billion**. Palantir's stock price has nearly tripled since Trump was elected.



Signage for Palantir is seen during the Association of the United States Army annual meeting and exposition at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Washington, DC, on October 14, 2024.

(Nathan Howard/Reuters)

But the expanding footprint inside the government has fueled fears that Palantir's advanced tools — coupled with cutting edge breakthroughs, like artificial intelligence, facial recognition software and predictive algorithms — could lead to high-tech mass surveillance. A key source of concern for critics on both the right and left is **an executive order Trump signed in March** commanding agencies to share data with each other, though it doesn't mention surveillance or Palantir.

“I don’t like the stated plans of Palantir,” Stone told Vance, he later recalled to his listeners. “I don’t want Big Brother knowing everything about me.”

Palantir has pushed back aggressively against the emerging narrative surrounding its government work. In a **recent media blitz**, Karp has defensively described Palantir as patriotic. He **told Fortune magazine** its software is a tool “to make America so strong we never fight.” He has also insisted Palantir programs **can’t be used** to abuse civil rights, while also dismissing fears about governments tracking their citizens.

“The primary evidence for a surveillance state in the West is not government on consumer; it’s a company knowing every single action you have at all times,” he said in an interview with Axios’ Mike Allen. But that hasn’t stopped concerns from reaching Vance. On his show “This Past Weekend,” comedian Theo Von pressed Vance this summer on Palantir and Thiel’s influence, calling the company’s capabilities “really scary.”



Palantir co-founder Peter Thiel speaks during the Bitcoin 2022 Conference in Miami, Florida, on April 7, 2022.

(Marco Bello/Getty Images)

Vance downplayed Palantir's role as "just connecting information" between agencies. Like Karp, he contended the relentless collection of data on Americans by private companies in the name of commerce is a greater threat than Palantir's government work, while also acknowledging that modern technology is "crazy and weird and it affects our privacy."

"The only real protection that we have against that is that we've got to elect the right people," Vance said.

Von, a key voice in helping Trump connect with young men last year, later called Vance's response a "political answer."

MAGA tensions over Big Tech

Vance has long tried to square his professed skepticism of Big Tech with his deep ties to some of the industry's most influential figures.

He **once wrote** that hearing Thiel speak at Yale was the "most significant moment" of his law school years and later joined Thiel's venture capital firm. When Vance **started his own fund in 2020**, Thiel joined former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and billionaire investor Marc Andreessen as backers.

But during his Ohio Senate campaign, despite Thiel's generous financial backing, Vance routinely attacked Facebook — where Thiel was an early investor and longtime board member — as well as Google.

Probed about Palantir at the Ole Miss event, Vance acknowledged concerns about artificial intelligence facilitating "large-scale surveillance." He argued he has fought against intrusive data collection practices since he first ran for Senate.

"Whether it's Palantir or any other technology company," he said.

(Palantir insists it doesn't collect or sell data on individuals.)



Vice President JD Vance talks with reporters after attending the weekly Senate Republican policy luncheon on October 28.

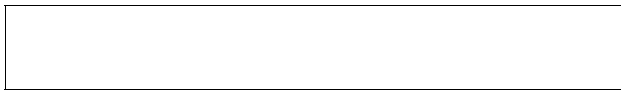
(Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

A Vance spokesperson did not respond to questions about how he has pushed the administration on privacy issues. None of the 213 executive orders Trump has signed since taking office have emphasized data protections for consumers, and this week, Trump publicly threw his support for blocking state regulations on AI companies.

Conservative concerns about Big Tech extend beyond Palantir. Bannon has publicly sparred with Elon Musk and questioned Trump's embrace of Silicon Valley. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has warned about the energy demands of data centers. Sen. Josh Hawley, a Missouri

Republican, has led congressional investigations into the **harms chatbots may cause children**.

But even as skepticism on the right grows, Vance’s standing in Silicon Valley remains an asset — and a source of speculation. Asked recently by Axios’ Mike Allen whom he hoped would replace Trump, Karp did not name Vance but described a figure who closely resembled the “Hillbilly Elegy” author: someone who could keep the border sealed, uphold conservative cultural norms and “credibly fight for workers.” Allen replied: “That sounds like the current Vice President.”



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