

Alex Karp of spy agency Palantir is the world's scariest CEO

His company is potentially creating the ultimate state surveillance tool, and Karp has recently been on a striking political and philosophical journey. His biographer reveals what makes him tick

Steve Rose

In a **recent interview**, Alex Karp said that his company Palantir was “the most important software

company in America and therefore in the world”. He may well be right. To some, Palantir is also the

scariest company in the world, what with its involvement in the Trump administration’s authoritarian

agenda. The potential end point of Palantir’s tech is an **all-powerful government system** amalgamating

citizens’ tax records, biometric data and other personal information – the ultimate state surveillance

tool. No wonder Palantir has been likened to George Orwell's Big Brother, or Skynet from the

Terminator movies.

Does this make Karp the scariest CEO in the world? There is some competition from Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos and Palantir's co-founder **Peter Thiel**. But 58-year-old Karp could give them all a run for their money in terms of influence, self-belief, ambition and – even in this gallery of oddballs – sheer eccentricity. In his increasingly frequent media appearances, Karp is a striking presence, with his cloud of unkempt grey hair, his 1.25x speed diction, and his mix of combative conviction and almost childish mannerisms. On CNBC's Squawk Box, he shook both fists simultaneously as he railed against short sellers betting against Palantir, whose share price has climbed nearly 600% in the past year: "It's super triggering," he complained. "Why do they have to go after us?"

Leaving aside for a moment questions about what Palantir actually *does*, the company seems to be at the heart of many of the world's pressing issues. In the US alone, its AI-powered data-analysis technology is **fuelling the deportations** being carried out by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (Ice), the Pentagon's unmanned drone programme, police departments' (**allegedly racist**) profiling of potential criminals and much more besides. Its software is being used by the Israel Defense Forces in its assaults on Gaza, by the Ukrainians against Russia and by police forces and corporations throughout the western world. In the UK, Palantir is at the heart of Labour's plans to "modernise" the armed forces and the NHS: when **Keir Starmer visited Washington** in February, his first stop after the White House was Palantir's office, where Karp showed him its latest military kit.

For the past few decades, Karp has stayed largely under the radar, but a new biography, *The Philosopher in the Valley*, reveals him to be a complex, thoughtful, often contradictory personality, with a background that explains many of his insecurities. "Fear is something that really drives him," says the journalist Michael Steinberger, the book's author. "One of the many fascinating things about **Palantir** is the way that it is the embodiment, in a lot of ways, of Karp ... he created Palantir to make the world safer for himself, or for people like him." Whether that remains the case is up for debate.

Fitness obsessed ... Karp has been known to lead tai chi classes for employees

Steinberger's book reveals Karp to be an idiosyncratic CEO with a singular lifestyle. He is obsessed with fitness, especially tai chi (he has been known to lead classes for employees) and cross-country skiing (he often wears ski gear day-to-day) and has a coterie of super-fit, mostly Norwegian bodyguards. Karp, who was **paid \$6.8bn** in 2024, owns an estimated 20 homes around the world, many of which are apparently sparsely furnished ski huts. He is not married and has no children but has been described as "geographically monogamous" – he has two concurrent female partners in different parts of the world. He claims to run Palantir like "an artists' colony" but he also likes to joke around in the workplace, comparing himself to Larry David, and once, according to Steinberger's book, suggested that his own comic stylings "might be called Karp Your Enthusiasm".

This is not just tech-bro quirkiness for its own sake, says Steinberger. "In this case, it is legitimately him. He is himself. And that is what he's always been." Steinberger went to the same college as Karp (Haverford, a private college in Pennsylvania, though the two did not know each other). He has spent the last five years snatching interviews with Karp whenever the CEO could fit him into his busy schedule – including, on one occasion, during his midday roller-skiing workout. Steinberger had to cycle alongside him, holding out his Dictaphone.

Karp grew up very much feeling like an outsider, it seems. The son of a Jewish paediatrician father and an African American artist mother, he was raised in Philadelphia, in an erudite, relatively privileged, leftwing environment. In a **2023 interview** he said: "I always thought if fascism comes, I will be the first or second person on the wall." As much as ethnicity, he considers his defining point of difference to be his dyslexia, which, he tells Steinberger, "fucked me but also gave me wings to fly". He also has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (he claims the tai chi helps him to focus).

w

At the heart of Labour's plans ... Keir Starmer and Karp at the Palantir offices in Washington DC in February. Photograph: @10DowningStreet @PalantirTech

Karp and Thiel first met as students at Stanford law school, where they hit it off despite being ideological opposites. But, while Thiel went off to found PayPal (with Musk) and embark on a fruitful tech investment career, Karp went to do a PhD in neoclassical social theory in Frankfurt. As a Jew, Steinberger says, Karp "wanted to understand how Germany, a pillar of European civilisation, had descended into barbarism." While so many tech titans have amassed a fortune then used it to promote their "philosophy", Karp has effectively done it the other way round. When he reconnected with Thiel and joined Palantir Technologies in 2004, he couldn't write a line of code but he did know something about "**ontology**" – how information is structured and organised. He was also, apparently, a persuasive personality; good at recruiting and motivating eccentric talents like himself.

Palantir's founding mission was "defending the west" – a nebulous and pliable goal admittedly, but also an unfashionable one, at a time when early 00s Silicon Valley was all about giving tech a consumer-friendly face. While the likes of Google, Apple, Facebook and Microsoft shied away from

e
e
n

working with the military, Palantir – which was never a consumer company – embraced the prospect, arguing that Silicon Valley should be helping the US to maintain its edge over threats from countries including China, Iran and, latterly, Russia. The company's name is derived from JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings mythology: a palantir is a "seeing stone" – something like a crystal ball – a surveillance device, in other words. Karp has spoken of Palantir's mission in terms of "saving the shire", and employees were sometimes referred to as "hobbits".

In its early days, Palantir assisted the US army in Iraq and Afghanistan, where it devised powerful tools for identifying enemy locations and attacks, arguably saving American lives. Even so, it sued the army in 2016, when it was being passed over for contracts. Palantir was also implicated in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in 2018, in which Facebook users' data was used to help influence their voting in national elections. But during the Covid pandemic, its tech assisted the US and the UK, among others, in tracking the spread of the disease and the distribution of vaccines and aid. Today it has contracts worth billions across US military and government agencies including the CIA, FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the National Security Agency, as well as Ice. You can see how the Big Brother comparisons started.

But, there are "some fundamental misconceptions about the work they do," says Steinberger. "They don't collect the data, they don't store the data; they provide software that helps companies and organisations make better use of their own data." That could mean devising software to integrate complex supply chains for a large corporation, such as Airbus. Or it could mean analysing huge amounts of data, and spotting patterns and connections in real time, so as to identify, say, a battlefield enemy, a domestic terrorist or an illegal immigrant (or, potentially, any other kind of individual).

Palantir argues that it has a **code of conduct**, and builds in guardrails to prevent abuses, including "civil liberties protections" – though it is not easy to verify such claims. "If abuses of data are taking place with Palantir software, it's not because Palantir is doing it, it's because the clients are doing it," says Steinberger. "I think of Palantir software as like a toaster. If you burn your toast, you don't blame the toaster."

Karp has spoken of Palantir's mission in terms of 'saving the shire' ... Karp in Idaho on 10 July. Photograph: Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Politically, Karp is difficult to pigeonhole. While the conservative, libertarian Thiel was an early Silicon Valley cheerleader for Trump, and campaigned for him in the 2016 presidential race, Karp was not. "I respect nothing about the dude. It would be hard to make up someone I find less appealing," **Karp said of Trump** in 2015. He voted for Hillary Clinton in that election, and backed Kamala Harris in 2024. Thiel had soured on Trump by 2024, but was instrumental in placing his protégé, JD Vance, as his running mate.

c

r

e

e

n

Since Trump's re-election, though, both Thiel and Karp seem to have fallen more into line. Karp wrote a million-dollar cheque for Trump's inauguration but did not attend. As a key defence contractor, Palantir also donated \$5m towards Trump's military parade in June. In a recent interview with Axios, Karp described himself as "an independent who admires what Trump has done on many things." In Karp's mind, "the price of doing business with the government is making nice with Trump," Steinberger says. Karp's argument, he says, is: "Look, we got into business to work with the government, you can't sit here and pull that support when someone you don't like is elected." Having once declared that fascism was his greatest fear, though, Karp could well be enabling it – by helping ICE to grab people off the street, some of whom could be innocent citizens, for example. Steinberger acknowledges the irony: "How do you square that circle? Well, in his case, I guess one thing is, he would deny that Trump is fascist. Karp would argue that we still have a functioning, independent judiciary, and a free press, for example." Karp also claims that Palantir has prevented "innumerable terror attacks" in Europe, which has actually helped save it from fascism. His argument about immigration, says Steinberger, is that "if the left doesn't take this concern seriously, voters are going to turn to people who do, and the left isn't going to like the outcome. That's how you got the first Trump presidency, and arguably it's one of the reasons you got the second one."

V

Cheerleader for Trump ... Peter Thiel in 2022. Photograph: Rebecca Blackwell/AP

It would seem that Karp believes there is no contradiction, but the "western values" he is defending appear to have evolved. When Steinberger first met him in 2019, he was talking about defending liberal democracy – making Palantir a "civil liberties juggernaut". "Judging by his own words ... he does not see multiracial, pluralistic democracy as the thing about the west that should be defended," argues Steinberger. Now, "he sees it much more as just a collection of countries bound by a shared Judeo-Christian heritage, and, to varying degrees, by an attachment to free enterprise. That's kind of where he is, I think. And it can lead you down some pretty dark paths."

In Karp's own book *The Technological Republic*, co-written with Nicholas W Zamiska and published in February, Karp seems more concerned with US dominance, in tech and the military, including defeating rivals such as China in the AI race. He has railed against identity politics: in an earnings call earlier this month, he declared Palantir to be "completely anti-woke". He believes that the west is too self-flagellating about its own superiority, and that "everything you learned at school or college about how the world works is intellectually incorrect". In his quarterly letter to shareholders in February, Karp referenced the political scientist Samuel Huntington's belief that "the rise of the west was not made possible 'by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion ... but rather by its superiority in applying organised violence'."

e
e
n

In May, a group of former Palantir employees wrote **an open letter** (titled “The Scouring of the Shire”) stating that “Palantir’s leadership has abandoned its founding ideals”, and that its principles of protecting against discrimination, disinformation and abuses of power “have now been violated, and are rapidly being dismantled at Palantir Technologies and across Silicon Valley”.

V

Activists protest against the federal government’s possible adoption of Palantir security software in Berlin in September. Photograph: Omer Messinger/Getty Images

As perplexing, objectionable and perhaps terrifying as some might find Karp, Steinberger did not come away disliking him. “I find him fascinating. I enjoyed our conversations,” he says. “He’s very fun to talk to. He’s very smart, but sometimes he’s going at a million miles an hour and it’s hard to follow his train of thought.”

Karp likes an argument, says Steinberger. That’s the way Palantir is run – “It’s always been a culture where pushback is welcome” – and, he says, Karp would often seek to get into a debate with Steinberger personally. “It got to be a running joke. I’d say: ‘Who cares what I think? I’m not here to interview myself, I’m here to interview *you*.’ And that would piss him off. He would laugh and say: ‘No, no, no, let’s argue.’” When Steinberger did engage with Karp, he usually regretted it: “About 99% of the time he is convinced he’s absolutely right ... You’d walk out after a conversation with him, and hours later you would be sitting there having a silent argument, firing back rebuttals, but he’s not there.”

Palantir is firmly cemented into military-industrial infrastructure, and business is booming, but Karp is not letting up. He has said he wants Palantir to be as dominant and indispensable as IBM was in the 1960s, when it was the world’s largest computing company and shaped the way government and private companies did business. He also seems to view the world in terms of an existential war between “the west” and its enemies. You could see this as irrationally paranoid, terrifyingly prescient or simply what happens when you read too much Tolkien – but Karp clearly feels that he has work to do. In a letter to shareholders earlier this year, he wrote: “We are still in the earliest stages, the beginning of the first act, of a revolution that will play out over years and decades.”

The Philosopher in the Valley by Michael Steinberger is published by Simon & Schuster (£25). To support the Guardian order your copy at guardianbookshop.com