UNDER REVIEW

THE PALANTIR GUIDE TO *SAVING AMERICA'S SOUL*

Alexander Karp, Palantir's philosopher-C.E.O., thinks that a restored military-industrial complex can make our country great again.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

February 19, 2025

Illustration by Alex Merto

Save this story

In the spring of 2014, a trans-anarchist Google engineer petitioned the White House to arrest our national decline. The plan was snappy: "1. Retire all government employees with full pensions. 2. Transfer administrative authority to

the tech industry. 3. Appoint Eric Schmidt CEO of America." Schmidt, then the chairman of Google, was an avatar of technocratic liberalism. Two decades earlier, as the largely unknown C.T.O. of Sun Microsystems, he helped Bill Clinton set up the first White House Web site, and, by the time of the Obama Administration, he served as Silicon Valley's unofficial consul to the Democratic Party. Schmidt was not himself a company "founder," a technologist's most regal credential, but he had performed as an able steward: when Larry Page and Sergey Brin struggled to reconcile their competing visions for Google's first corporate jet—Brin wanted a California king bed, Page did not—Schmidt negotiated a compromise. He was sensible and civic-minded. He was the adult in the room.

In those days, Silicon Valley was perceived as an apolitical place. People in the industry were associated with a naïve techno-utopianism—the belief that problems of governance might be properly demystified as problems of engineering. They might have made libertarian or even anarcho-capitalist noises from time to time, but their underlying commitments were more or less progressive. Peter Thiel espoused the view that freedom and democracy were incompatible, and he likened the most capable founders to dictators, but these ideas seemed idiosyncratic and vain rather than dangerous. The Google engineer's petition in favor of a Valley-backed coup was taken as a spoof. It wasn't. A "neoreactionary" vanguard had arisen in the Bay Area. Its objective was not to retreat from the citadels of governance but to place them under siege. The Google engineer had been influenced by an obscure programmer-monarchist named Curtis Yarvin, a.k.a. Mencius Moldbug. America, Yarvin declared, suffered from "chronic kinglessness." Silicon Valley, where the best companies were run by executive fiat, knew how to make the trains run on time.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



Today Yarvin, whom J. D. Vance has cited as an influence, is practically a household name. Yarvin, in his modesty, only ever called for one king. Now we appear to have two. Donald Trump and Elon Musk seem to share the aim of personal enrichment. Their avowed priorities do not otherwise cohere, at least at first glance. Trump is a nationalist who looks to the past and promises its restoration. He would like to take Greenland. Musk is a free marketeer who looks to the future and promises its realization. He would like to take Mars. Liberals might take solace in their partnership's apparent fundamental instability. This may be a coping mechanism.

"The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West," a new book by Alexander C. Karp, the C.E.O. of the software company Palantir Technologies, and his aide-de-camp Nicholas W. Zamiska, demonstrates how these attitudes might profitably fit together. Although Karp dislikes Trump, he appeals to a more muscular America. And, although he admires Musk, he would prefer that the government remain intact. The book's central claim is that the survival of the American experiment depends on the technological revitalization of the military-industrial complex. National pride ought to provide Silicon Valley with a sense of purpose. Silicon Valley's talents might in turn mend our sense of national competence. From our desire to take Greenland might flow our ability to take Mars.

With the possible exception of Peter Thiel's "Zero to One," which is one of the more strapping examples of the business-and-self-help crossover genre, most books by tech mandarins are disappointing. Karp seems like the sort of person who might have improved the canon. He was raised, outside of Philadelphia, by a Jewish pediatrician and a Black artist, and routed himself from

Haverford College to Stanford Law School. The only redeeming part of his time at Stanford, which he otherwise hated, was having Thiel as a classmate. The two shared the intimate antagonism of "feral animals," as Karp once put it, and they spent late nights locked into debates about the relative virtues of socialism and capitalism. (Thiel represented capitalism.) Karp proceeded to a doctoral program in philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt, the home of the Institute for Social Research, which gave rise to the legendary "Frankfurt School." He briefly studied under Jürgen Habermas, whose evaluation of the "legitimation crisis" appears to have made an impression on him. In 2003, Thiel started Palantir and soon after, recruited Karp to run it.

Palantir, which was named for the "seeing stones" in "The Lord of the Rings," had twin inspirations. One was the dot-com collapse, which flattened the bubbly frivolity of early e-commerce. The other was September 11th. Thiel believed that a maturing tech industry needed to put away its eToys.com and devote itself to the serious business of national defense. Palantir's data-integration platform pledged to discern obscure patterns that might otherwise elude human analysts. The company's overarching ambition, Karp has said, was "to support the West"—in the local dialect, they were "saving the Shire" from the eye of Sauron. The Thiel-Karp team guaranteed a reasonable calibration of "total information awareness" and the protection of civil liberties. They were criticized from both flanks. Civil libertarians inevitably likened their products to the glittering touch screens in the predictive-policing dystopia of "Minority Report." Other skeptics accused them of peddling vaporware. Selling infrastructure to the panopticon was not a safe play, and investors were skittish. Employees considered their public reputation unfair and inaccurate, but their communications team recognized that a sinister aura was great marketing. A small raft of contracts, along with support from the C.I.A.'s venture arm, kept them afloat until the world readied itself for their relevance. Today their market capitalization is two hundred and eighty billion dollars.

Get early access to new short stories, and more from the literary world, when you sign up for our Books & Fiction newsletter.

gideonlk@gmail.com

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

"The Technological Republic" is equal parts company lore, jeremiad, and homily. It begins with a bracing precis of the cultural, political, and technological posture of "the West," a concept that has been lamentably "discarded by many, almost casually." Our government "has retreated from the pursuit of the kind of large-scale breakthroughs that gave rise to the atomic bomb and the internet." Silicon Valley has "turned inward, focusing its energy on narrow consumer products," and abdicating its more profound responsibilities. Only with jointly redoubled efforts will we construct "the technology and artificial intelligence capabilities that will address the most pressing challenges that we collectively face." Chief among these challenges are the threats posed by an A.I.-enhanced posse of China, Russia, and Iran. The real enemy, however, is already in the house. Our society is rudderless and soft. The book's diagnosis recalls the "post-liberalism" common to many thinkers on the new right: "The vital yet messy questions of what constitutes a good life, which collective endeavors society should pursue, and what a shared and national identity can make possible have been set aside as the anachronisms of another age."

The book, too, is an anachronism of another age—an age called "last October"—and its vision of a mutually supportive relationship between Washington and Silicon Valley has in the interim been rendered almost quaint. Karp supported the campaigns of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and "The Technological Republic" was manifestly intended as an intervention in the status-quo context of a

Democratic victory. The book imagines a more active government, not no government at all. Karp's political aim reflects an attempt to resuscitate what is now frequently disparaged as Cold War liberalism, or the belief that we fought for freedom and comfort on two fronts—that the struggle for equality at home was tied to the struggle against Communism abroad. The atomic program, which was a win-win contribution to both overseas deterrence and domestic progress, is Karp's model for how we might approach the dual-use technologies of artificial intelligence. The A.I. arms race, like its nuclear precursor, is poised to reshape the global order, and we cede first-mover advantage to China at our peril.

There are reasons to mistrust such fortune-telling, especially from people with a vested interest in the outcome. Arms races aren't just idle predictions; they are self-fulfilling prophecies. The book's inferences about the present state of A.I. are less controversial and more trenchant. The remarkable pace of A.I. development throws into relief the degree to which our engineering talent has been poorly deployed. We ought to expect better things from startups than improved advertising technology, stupid farm games, and luxury appurtenances for twentysomething urbanites.

The question is how this happened. Many of Karp's colleagues blame the government for regulating away their ability to do interesting things. Karp has little patience for Washington bureaucracy, but the primary target of "The Technological Republic" is not a nation that has failed Silicon Valley. It is more cogent and original as a story about how Silicon Valley has failed the nation. The employees are spoiled and the investors are cowards. The tech barons are mere clerks and shopkeepers in disguise. Engineers and executives have lost their taste for rockets and spy planes. In the spring of 2018, Google employees protested against the company's participation in Project Maven, a Department of Defense initiative to better analyze reconnaissance imagery. Their misgivings, Karp and Zamiska write, did not reflect "a principled commitment to pacifism or non-violence," but "a more fundamental abandonment of belief in anything" other than their own bourgeois comfort. Palantir stepped into the breach and picked up that

contract. The company has not only accepted their grave obligations to national defense; it has fought for the right to serve the country. The Defense Department's byzantine procurement policies had ruled out the use of Palantir's commercially available software. In 2016, Palantir sued the government and won. Two years later, it was awarded an enormous Army contract.

Under a Harris Administration, "The Technological Republic" might have been brushed aside as merely Karp's attempt to talk his own book—which, for the most part, it is. Harris, in her D.N.C. speech, promised that America would have the "strongest, most lethal fighting force," and presumably Palantir would have continued to thrive as one of Silicon Valley's few defense contractors. Harris's loss, as it turns out, was Karp's gain. This is true in a banal financial way: compared with its average price during the Biden Administration, Palantir's stock has appreciated nearly six hundred per cent. It is more interestingly true on the plane of ideas.

Musk's response to a coddled rank and file has been a purge. When he took over Twitter, he sent a company-wide e-mail that presented a "fork in the road," as he put it: serve at his pleasure or find another job. The point was not to improve Twitter's performance. It was to remind his employees of their fungibility. One of his first acts under the auspices of Trump's Department of Government Efficiency was a government-wide e-mail with a buyout offer. The subject line, lest there be any doubt as to its authorship, was "Fork in the Road." Karp has a different attitude. Silicon Valley is not proof of concept for monarchy. It is proof of concept for war.

Silicon Valley has, or used to have, a special culture. It did not emerge in defiance of the government but as a cornerstone of the modern national project. Federal support for technological development was financial, of course, but Karp thinks this understates its monumental significance. The military-industrial

complex was a kind of spiritual investment, a flame that swept through the research community and welded it together. The corporate laborers of the industrial age were drudges, and might have needed the scaffolding of managerial hierarchies to make widgets in bulk. The scientists and engineers of the electronic age, in contrast, did not respond well to top-down instruction. They responded well to meaningful challenges. They could be thrown into a room, or into the desert, with only two parameters: a hard problem to solve and a good reason to solve it. The main problem to solve was defense, and the best reasons to solve it were to secure liberty and prosperity for all.

This inspired the invention of actual objects, such as bombs, but it also inspired the invention of new processes—the languages of control theory and cybernetics—that in turn became novel experiments in social organization. Scientists and engineers arranged themselves in nested feedback loops; they were quick to criticize, and even quicker to forgive. They weren't Randian jerks who believed in domination. They believed in the kind of grace that comes from a shared conviction in the civic purpose of their work. The campuses that came to life between San Francisco and San Jose were "a form of modern-day artistic colony, or technological commune," Karp and Zamiska write, and these campuses recruited "a generation of talent that wanted to do something other than tinker with financial markets or consult."

The book's account of tech culture's origins is rosy and coarse—the ChatGPT version of Fred Turner's classic "From Counterculture to Cyberculture"—but it's a useful corrective to the fantasy that Musk sprung fully formed from the head of Zeus. The notion that these companies were sovereign enclaves of pitilessly despotic geniuses is a myth of recent vintage. Even more belated is the idea that Musk might summon an army of coder-ephebes and rescue us from an inertial government. Going around and breaking things, the authors of "The Technological Republic" think, is not going to breathe new life into our collective endeavors. The government must instead be strong enough to identify what it needs, make an unapologetic case for why, and then provide aspiring venders with

a normal demand signal—not four thousand pages of arcane pre-specifications. In the absence of organized government demand, companies will turn to the consumer market instead. And the consumer market should not be the arbiter of value. "The grandiose rallying cry of a generation of founders in Silicon Valley was simply to build," Karp and Zamiska write. "Few asked what needed to be built, and why." The tech industry must meet the government halfway by reassessing its own priorities. The national interest is a noble pursuit. Games for your phone are not.

The book is good as a diagnosis of this phenomenon—the tendency to churn out "derivative and retrograde" products under the guise of innovation. It is even better as an exemplification of it. It reads like an automated Spotify playlist of the greatest hits of national decline. Even its chapter titles ("The Hollowing Out of the American Mind") have the optimized ring of a recommendation engine: If you liked Allan Bloom and Jonathan Haidt, you'll like this. The "soul of the country" has been "abandoned in the name of inclusivity," and "unironic belief in something greater—in many corporate boardrooms and certainly the halls of our most selective colleges and universities—is looked down upon as essentially preindustrial and retrograde." Karp goes out of his way to identify as a liberal, but the only liberal mentioned in "The Technological Republic" is the communitarian philosopher Michael Sandel. The book's touchstones are instead an algorithmic procession of disgruntled conservatives: Roger Scruton, Roger Kimball, Irving Kristol, Leo Strauss, Niall Ferguson, and Peggy Noonan.

The repackaging of old grievances feels like a missed opportunity. There is a growing bipartisan consensus that American innovation has lost the plot. To blame a lack of ambition, or a culture of decline, is merely to re-state the problem. To attribute the corrosion of institutional trust to such bugbears as relativism or postmodernism is to ignore explanations that are both more concrete and more parsimonious. The military-industrial complex did not lose its lustre because

Americans were taught that all cultures are equally valid, or because sincerity as such went out of style. The military-industrial complex lost its lustre when it embarked on a series of pointless and destructive wars. Our institutions were damaged by things that we *did*. They cannot be repaired with an appeal to remember who we *are*.

Karp seems to be operating under the impression that what Americans need is permission to feel patriotic again. His doctoral dissertation—"Aggression in the Life-World: The Expansion of the Parsonian Concept of Aggression Through the Description of the Connection Between Jargon, Aggression, and Culture"—culminates in an interpretation of the German writer Martin Walser's acceptance speech upon receipt of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1998. Walser notoriously described Auschwitz as a "moral cudgel" used to enforce a sense of perennial shame. His claims to victimhood, Karp pointed out, were empirically untrue but extraordinarily effective. His lecture recognized and channelled his audience's feelings of unconscious aggression and resentment. Germans just wanted to feel proud again, and Walser gave them a warrant to do so.

"The Technological Republic" also invokes this episode, but with Walser now as soothsayer. Germany's perpetual inability to slough off the sins of its past and simply get on with it, the book stipulates, has had serious repercussions: "An intense skepticism of German identity, of allowing any sense of the nation to take hold in the wreckage of the war, has had significant costs and deprived the continent of a credible deterrent to Russian aggression."

Americans, too, suffer from a deficit of national pride. In some progressive circles, the reëlection of Trump has confirmed the suspicion that "we" are beyond redemption, and that liberals were delusional when they spoke of our democratic experiment in terms of moral progress. "The Technological Republic" presents an alternative case in favor of a healthy self-image, one that relies on our steady accumulation of know-how. In its better moments, the book advances the

notion that technological progress, and the hope for the future it represents, might put the national project on a secure footing.

Karp identifies his faith in our engineering prowess with the American tradition of pragmatism; in the span of only three pages, "The Technological Republic" calls for a "voracious pragmatism," a "ruthless pragmatism," and a "ravenous pragmatism." The pragmatist tradition does, in fact, have a lot to say about the relationships between loyalty, prosperity, and bloodshed. In 1910, William James, one of the founders of our national philosophy, wrote an essay titled "The Moral Equivalent of War." Combat, he acknowledged, had long been recognized as "the gory nurse that trained societies to cohesiveness." It was "a sort of sacrament." The sacrifices of war were the Nietzschean wages of heroism: "Its 'horrors' are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers, of co-education and zo-ophily, of 'consumer's leagues' and 'associated charities,' of industrialism unlimited, and feminism unabashed. No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more!"

A hearty society, James agreed, could not get along without the martial virtues of discipline, focus, interdependence, and "intrepidity." Actual war might have been a sufficient condition for the cultivation of these values, but it was not a necessary one. James proposed that the nation's youths pay their "blood-tax" in the form of a national-service program that would redound to our universal benefit. Rich and poor kids alike would put on hardhats and erect skyscrapers or build dams. The national community could be knit together without indulging the chauvinism of belligerence. This did not immunize his fellow-pragmatists from the seductions of a fight. Only a few years later, John Dewey came out in support of American intervention against Prussian militarism, imagining that, in a two-birds-one-stone way, the war effort could also promote social reform. His former student Randolph Bourne accused him of capitulation to the cheap thrills of nationalist fervor, to the premise that "war is the health of the state." Karp approvingly quotes a line of Dewey's from 1922: one must "get down from noble aloofness into the muddy stream of concrete things."

Yet Dewey, by then, already regretted his enthusiasm for a war that brought only mass suffering and death abroad and the suppression of civil liberties at home. He had belatedly learned Bourne's lesson about the temptation to kill two birds with one stone: it unleashes forces that do not submit to pragmatic control. Karp maintains his confidence in war as the great dual-use technology, and the book relies on circular logic: national security is supposed to inspire national pride, but national pride is apparently the precondition for national security.

The pragmatic strain of "The Technological Republic" raises the genuinely strategic matter of how we might prepare for a battlefield suffused with advanced artificial intelligence: "The broader question we face is not whether a new generation of increasingly autonomous weapons incorporating artificial intelligence will be built. It is who will build them and for what purpose." This seems like something to be taken seriously, and perhaps Palantir is planning in earnest. The other strain of the book abandons strategic pragmatism in favor of metaphysical grandeur: "The generation that is most capable and best positioned to construct this next wave of offensive capabilities is also the most content to retreat from projects involving national defense or communal purpose." This task —which involves defining the national purpose—would also seem to be something to be taken seriously, but it's probably not one we should entrust to Palantir. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

- What the midterms mean for Donald Trump.
- The doxing of Jane Doe and the fallout from the "Cornell Seven" rape case.

- "She Made Me Do It": a famed equestrian instructor shot his most annoying student.
- Parents disagreed on whether to vaccinate their children. Then the kids got sick.
- Play a new game of Laugh Lines every day of the week!

Want better search results? Make *The New Yorker* a preferred source in Google.

Sign up for our daily newsletter to receive the best stories from *The New Yorker*.



Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir "A Sense of Direction."

More: Technology Silicon Valley Military U.S. Department of Defense

The Books & Fiction Newsletter

Early access to new short stories, plus essays, criticism, and coverage of the literary world.

gideonlk@gmail.com

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our user agreement (including class action waiver and arbitration provisions), and acknowledge our privacy policy.

READ MORE

THE LEDE

Donald Trump After the Midterms

If the coming election does result in a blue wave, Trump will be faced with the fact of his diminishment. The rest of us will be faced with the wreckage.

By David Remnick

ANNALS OF MONEY

The Battle to Pass a Billionaire Tax

Most Democratic voters say that they favor a wealth tax, but a California ballot initiative has plenty of liberal opponents.

By Nicholas Lemann

OPEN QUESTIONS

Will A.I. Still Take Our Jobs?

The jobs apocalypse hasn't arrived. Something else is happening instead.

By Joshua Rothman

BOOKS

How Test Engineers Decide What Counts as Good Enough

Test engineers stage reality, sometimes by extreme means, to make sure airplanes don't fall apart, children can't open pill bottles, and bears won't break into coolers.

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

THE FRONT ROW

"The Social Reckoning" Leaves Out the Human Element

In Aaron Sorkin's overwritten sequel to "The Social Network," inspired performances by Mikey Madison and Jeremy Allen White can't bring the main characters to life.

By Richard Brody

INFINITE SCROLL

Hollywood's Tech-Founder Fixation Takes a Dark Turn

Tech-entrepreneur bio-pics used to give us flawed men who built great products. But the latest wave of movies, from "The Social Reckoning" to "Artificial," recast Silicon Valley titans as unambiguous villains, and suggest that the products themselves are the threat.

By Brady Brickner-Wood

THE POLITICAL SCENE

The Battle for the Post-Trump Right

For decades, the Heritage Foundation was a conservative powerhouse. Can it stay relevant in the influencer age?

By Emma Green

THE LEDE

The Humanism Driving the Anti-A.I. Movement

At the Pro-Human Assembly in Washington, D.C., attendees talked less about jobs and policy, and more about their philosophy of life.

By Becca Rothfeld

ON TELEVISION

The Bari Weiss Effect on "60 Minutes"

CBS News' editor-in-chief has pledged to "speak for the seventy-five per cent" of people on the center right and the center left; the reality is different.

By Vinson Cunningham

THE LEDE

There Is No A.I. "Race"

We're constantly told that Chinese advances would have catastrophic consequences. But the first to innovate is rarely the one who wins.

By Chang Che

PAGE-TURNER

MacKenzie Scott's Substack Novel Can't Escape the Amazon Juggernaut

Scott's decision to self-publish could be seen as a protest against her ex-husband's company—or as a sign of how profoundly it's altered the publishing landscape.

By Rhoda Feng

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Why America Looks the Way It Does

From vast grids to winding suburbs, Americans have spent two centuries remaking the landscape around property.

By Daniel Immerwahr

Privacy Information