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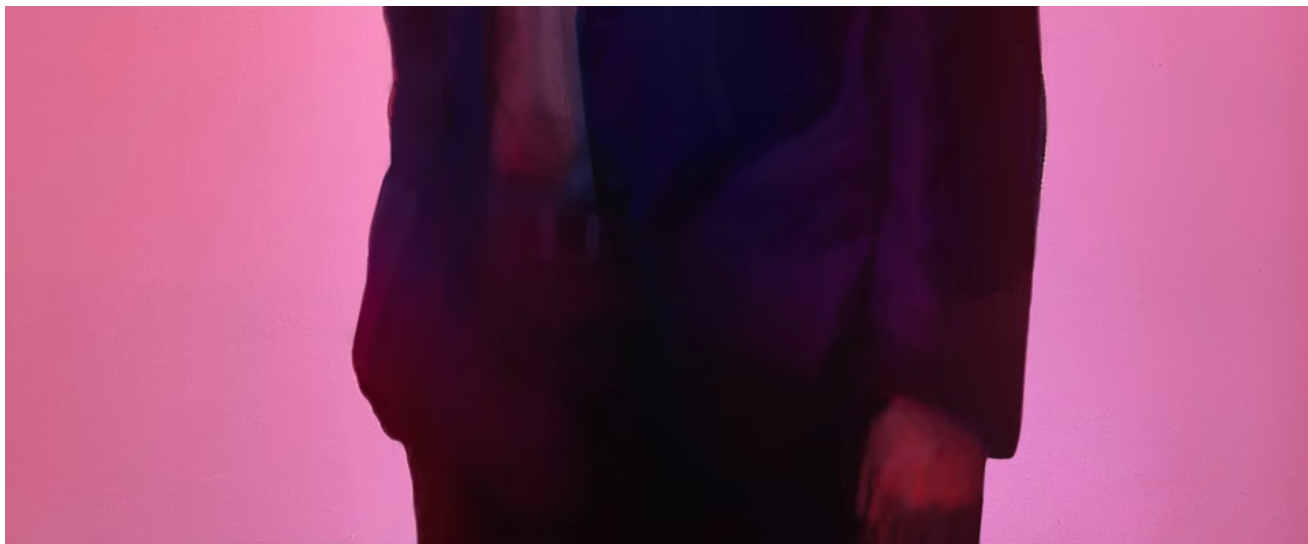
POLITICS

## PETER THIEL IS TAKING A BREAK FROM DEMOCRACY

It's one of his many, many disappointments.



By Barton Gellman





Painting by M.K. Komins for The Atlantic

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**I**T WASN'T CLEAR at first why Peter Thiel agreed to talk to me.

He is, famously, no friend of the media. But Thiel—co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, avatar of techno-libertarianism, bogeyman of the left—consented to a series of long interviews at his home and office in Los Angeles. He was more open than I expected him to be, and he had a lot to say.

But the impetus for these conversations? He wanted me to publish a promise he was going to make, so that he would not be tempted to go back on his word. And what was that thing he needed to say, loudly? That he wouldn't be giving money to any politician, including Donald Trump, in the next presidential campaign.

Already, he has endured the wrath of Trump. Thiel tried to duck Trump's calls for a while, but in late April the former president managed to get him on the phone. Trump reminded Thiel that he had backed two of Thiel's protégés, Blake Masters and J. D. Vance, in their Senate races last year. Thiel had given each of them more than

\$10 million; now Trump wanted Thiel to give the same to him.

When Thiel declined, Trump “told me that he was very sad, very sad to hear that,” Thiel recounted. “He had expected way more of me. And that’s how the call ended.”

Months later, word got back to Thiel that Trump had called Masters to discourage him from running for Senate again, and had called Thiel a “fucking scumbag.”

Thiel’s hope was that this article would “lock me into not giving any money to Republican politicians in 2024,” he said. “There’s always a chance I might change my mind. But by talking to you, it makes it hard for me to change my mind. My husband doesn’t want me to give them any more money, and he’s right. I know they’re going to be pestering me like crazy. And by talking to you, it’s going to lock me out of the cycle for 2024.”

This matters because of Thiel’s unique role in the American political ecosystem. He is the techiest of tech evangelists, the purest distillation of Silicon Valley’s reigning ethos. As such, he has become the embodiment of a strain of thinking that is pronounced—and growing—among tech founders.

And why does he want to cut off politicians? It’s not that they are mediocre as individuals, and therefore incapable of bringing about the kinds of civilization-defining changes a man like him would expect to see. His disappointment runs deeper than that. Their failure to make the world conform to his vision has soured him on the entire enterprise—to the point where he no longer thinks it matters very much who wins the next election.

Not for the first time, Peter Thiel has lost interest in democracy.

**T**HIEL’S DECISION to endorse Trump at the Republican National Convention in 2016 surprised some of his closest friends. Thiel has cultivated an image as a man of ideas, an intellectual who studied philosophy with René Girard and owns first editions of Leo Strauss in English and German. Trump quite obviously did not share these interests, or Thiel’s libertarian principles.

But four months earlier, Thiel had seen an omen. On March 18, 2016, a jury delivered an extraordinary \$115 million verdict to Hulk Hogan in his invasion-of-privacy lawsuit against Gawker Media, whose website had published portions of a sex tape featuring Hogan. Thiel had secretly funded the litigation against Gawker, which had mocked him for years and outed him as gay. The verdict drove the company out of business.

For Thiel, the outcome was more than vindication. It was a sign. When the jury came back, “my instant reaction at that point was ‘Wow, maybe Trump wins the election,’” he told me. In his mind, Gawker was a stand-in for the media writ large, hostile to the presumptive Republican nominee; Hogan was a Trumplike figure; and the jury—the voters—had taken his side.

Thiel himself had not yet publicly embraced Trump. In the Republican primary, he had backed Carly Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard CEO and a fellow Stanford alum, with a \$2 million contribution. Though his candidate had lost, he planned to attend the RNC as a delegate.

Then came a call from Donald Trump Jr. Thiel had never met father or son, and had yet to give money to Trump’s campaign, but the younger Trump had noticed his name on the delegate list. The convention was 10 days away, and Trump was short on high-profile endorsements. “Do you want to speak?” Don Jr. asked. Thiel thought it might be fun.

He sounded out his old friend Reid Hoffman, the co-founder of LinkedIn, who has

since become his political nemesis. “We were talking, and he said, ‘I think I’m going to—I’m considering going and giving a speech at the Republican National Convention,’” Hoffman recalled. “And I laughed, thinking he was joking. Right? And it was like, ‘No, no, no, I’m not joking.’”

For years, Thiel had been saying that he generally favored the more pessimistic candidate in any presidential race because “if you’re too optimistic, it just shows you’re out of touch.” He scorned the rote optimism of politicians who, echoing Ronald Reagan, portrayed America as a shining city on a hill. Trump’s America, by contrast, was a broken landscape, under siege.

Thiel is not against government in principle, his friend Auren Hoffman (who is no relation to Reid) says. “The ’30s, ’40s, and ’50s—which had massive, crazy amounts of power—he admires because it was effective. We built the Hoover Dam. We did the Manhattan Project,” Hoffman told me. “We started the space program.”

But the days when great men could achieve great things in government are gone, Thiel believes. He disdains what the federal apparatus has become: rule-bound, stifling of innovation, a “senile, central-left regime.” His libertarian critique of American government has curdled into an almost nihilistic impulse to demolish it.

“‘Make America great again’ was the most pessimistic slogan of any candidate in 100 years, because you were saying that we are no longer a great country,” Thiel told me. “And that was a shocking slogan for a major presidential candidate.”

He thought people needed to hear it. Thiel gave \$1.25 million to the Trump campaign, and had an office in Trump Tower during the transition, where he suggested candidates for jobs in the incoming administration. (His protégé Michael Kratsios was named chief technology officer, but few of Thiel’s other candidates got jobs.)

“Voting for Trump was like a not very articulate scream for help,” Thiel told me. He fantasized that Trump’s election would somehow force a national reckoning. He believed somebody needed to tear things down—slash regulations, crush the

administrative state—before the country could rebuild.

He admits now that it was a bad bet.

“There are a lot of things I got wrong,” he said. “It was crazier than I thought. It was more dangerous than I thought. They couldn’t get the most basic pieces of the government to work. So that was—I think that part was maybe worse than even my low expectations.”

But if supporting Trump was a gamble, Thiel told me, it’s not one he regrets.

**R**EID HOFFMAN, who has known Thiel since college, long ago noticed a pattern in his old friend’s way of thinking. Time after time, Thiel would espouse grandiose, utopian hopes that failed to materialize, leaving him “kind of furious or angry” about the world’s unwillingness to bend to whatever vision was possessing him at the moment. “Peter tends to be not ‘glass is half empty’ but ‘glass is fully empty,’” Hoffman told me.

Disillusionment was a recurring theme in my conversations with Thiel. He is worth between \$4 billion and \$9 billion. He lives with his husband and two children in a glass palace in Bel Air that has nine bedrooms and a 90-foot infinity pool. He is a titan of Silicon Valley and a conservative kingmaker. Yet he tells the story of his life as a series of disheartening setbacks.

Born in Germany, the son of a mining engineer, Thiel lived briefly in South West Africa (modern-day Namibia) as a child but grew up primarily in Ohio and California. After graduating from Stanford and then Stanford Law, he worked briefly on the East Coast before heading back to Silicon Valley.

In 1998, Thiel teamed up with Max Levchin, a brilliant computer scientist, and together they founded the company that became PayPal, with the declared purpose of creating a libertarian alternative to government currency. That grand ambition went unfulfilled, but PayPal turned out to be a terrific way to pay for online purchases, which were growing exponentially. In 2002, eBay bought the company for \$1.5

billion.

In 2004, Thiel co-founded Palantir Technologies, a private intelligence firm that does data mining for government and private clients at home and abroad. The CIA's venture-capital arm, called In-Q-Tel, was his first outside investor.

This was also the year he placed the most celebrated wager in the history of venture capital. He met Mark Zuckerberg, liked what he heard, and became Facebook's first outside investor. Half a million dollars bought him 10 percent of the company, most of which he cashed out for about \$1 billion in 2012. He came to regret the sale, however; at Facebook's market peak, in 2021, his stake would have been worth many times more.

Thiel made some poor investments, losing enormous sums by going long on the stock market in 2008, when it nose-dived, and then shorting the market in 2009, when it rallied. But on the whole, he has done exceptionally well. Alex Karp, his Palantir co-founder, who agrees with Thiel on very little other than business, calls him "the world's best venture investor."

Thiel told me this is indeed his ambition, and he hinted that he may have achieved it. But his dreams have always been much, much bigger than that.

He longs for a world in which great men are free to work their will on society, unconstrained by government or regulation or "redistributionist economics" that would impinge on their wealth and power—or any obligation, really, to the rest of humanity. He longs for radical new technologies and scientific advances on a scale most of us can hardly imagine. He takes for granted that this kind of progress will redound to the benefit of society at large.

More than anything, he longs to live forever.

Thiel does not believe death is inevitable. Calling death a law of nature is, in his view, just an excuse for giving up. "It's something we are told that demotivates us from trying harder," he said. He has spent enormous sums trying to evade his own end but

feels that, if anything, he should devote even more time and money to solving the problem of human mortality.

From the January/February 2023 issue: Adam Kirsch on the people cheering for humanity's end

Thiel grew up reading a great deal of science fiction and fantasy—Heinlein, Asimov, Clarke. But especially Tolkien; he has said that he read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy at least 10 times. Tolkien's influence on his worldview is obvious: Middle-earth is an arena of struggle for ultimate power, largely without government, where extraordinary individuals rise to fulfill their destinies. Also, there are immortal elves who live apart from men in a magical sheltered valley.

Did his dream of eternal life trace to *The Lord of the Rings*? I wondered.

Yes, Thiel said, perking up. “There are all these ways where trying to live unnaturally long goes haywire” in Tolkien's works. But you also have the elves. “And then there are sort of all these questions, you know: How are the elves different from the humans in Tolkien? And they're basically—I think the main difference is just, they're humans that don't die.”

“So why can't we be elves?” I asked.

Thiel nodded reverently, his expression a blend of hope and chagrin.

“Why can't we be elves?” he said.

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**T**HIEL'S ABANDONMENT of Trump is not the first time he has decided to step away from politics.

During college, he co-founded *The Stanford Review*, gleefully throwing bombs at identity politics and the university's diversity-minded reform of the curriculum. He co-wrote *The Diversity Myth* in 1995, a treatise against what he recently called the



“craziness and silliness and stupidity and wickedness” of the left.

As he built his companies and grew rich, he began pouring money into political causes and candidates—libertarian groups such as the Endorse Liberty super PAC, in addition to a wide range of conservative Republicans, including Senators Orrin Hatch and Ted Cruz and the anti-tax Club for Growth’s super PAC.

But something changed for Thiel in 2009, the first of several swings of his political pendulum. That year he wrote a manifesto titled “The Education of a Libertarian,” in which he disavowed electoral politics as a vehicle for reshaping society. The people, he concluded, could not be trusted with important decisions. “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible,” he wrote.

It was a striking declaration. An even more notable one followed: “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.” (He elaborated, after some backlash, that he did not literally oppose women’s suffrage, but neither did he affirm his support for it.)

Thiel laid out a plan, for himself and others, “to find an escape from politics in all its forms.” He wanted to create new spaces for personal freedom that governments could not reach—spheres where the choices of one great man could still be paramount. “The fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom,” he wrote. His manifesto has since become legendary in Silicon Valley, where his worldview is shared by other powerful men (and men hoping to be Peter Thiel).

Thiel’s investment in cryptocurrencies, like his founding vision at PayPal, aimed to foster a new kind of money “free from all government control and dilution.” His decision to rescue Elon Musk’s struggling SpaceX in 2008—with a \$20 million infusion that kept the company alive after three botched rocket launches—came with aspirations to promote space as an open frontier with “limitless possibility for escape

from world politics.” (I tried to reach Musk at X, requesting an interview, but got a poop emoji in response.)

It was seasteading that became Thiel’s great philanthropic cause in the late aughts and early 2010s. The idea was to create autonomous microstates on platforms in international waters. This, Thiel believed, was a more realistic path toward functioning libertarian societies in the short term than colonizing space. He gave substantial sums to Patri Friedman, the grandson of the economist Milton Friedman, to establish the nonprofit Seasteading Institute.

Thiel told a room full of believers at an institute conference in 2009 that most people don’t think seasteading is possible and will therefore not interfere until it’s too late. “The question of whether seasteading is desirable or possible in my mind is not even relevant,” he said. “It is absolutely necessary.”

Engineering challenges aside, Max Levchin, his friend and PayPal co-founder, dismissed the idea that Thiel would ever actually move to one of these specks in the sea. “There’s zero chance Peter Thiel would live on Sealand,” he said, noting that Thiel likes his comforts too much. (Thiel has mansions around the world and a private jet. Seal performed at his 2017 wedding, at the Belvedere Museum in Vienna.)

By 2015, six years after declaring his intent to change the world from the private sector, Thiel began having second thoughts. He cut off funding for the Seasteading Institute—years of talk had yielded no practical progress—and turned to other forms of escape. He already had German and American citizenship, but he invested millions of dollars in New Zealand and obtained citizenship there in 2011. He bought a former sheep station on 477 acres in the lightly populated South Island that had the makings of an End Times retreat in the country where the *Lord of the Rings* films were shot. Sam Altman, the former venture capitalist and now CEO of OpenAI, revealed in 2016 that in the event of global catastrophe, he and Thiel planned to wait it out in Thiel’s New Zealand hideaway.

When I asked Thiel about that scenario, he seemed embarrassed and deflected the

question. He did not remember the arrangement as Altman did, he said. “Even framing it that way, though, makes it sound so ridiculous,” he told me. “If there is a real end of the world, there is no place to go.”

From the September 2023 issue: Ross Andersen on Sam Altman’s ambitious, ingenious, terrifying quest to create a new form of intelligence

**O**VER AND OVER, Thiel has voiced his discontent with what’s become of the grand dreams of science fiction in the mid-20th century. “We’d have colonies on the moon, you’d have robots, you’d have flying cars, you’d have cities in the ocean, under the ocean,” he said in his Seasteading Institute keynote. “You’d have eco farming. You’d turn the deserts into arable land. There were sort of all these incredible things that people thought would happen in the ’50s and ’60s and they would sort of transform the world.”

None of that came to pass. Even science fiction turned hopeless—nowadays, you get nothing but dystopias. The tech boom brought us the iPhone and Uber and social media, none of them a fundamental improvement to the human condition. He hungered for advances in the world of atoms, not the world of bits.

For a time, Thiel thought he knew how to set things right. Founders Fund, the venture-capital firm he established in 2005 with Luke Nosek and Ken Howery, published a manifesto that complained, “We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters.” The fund, therefore, would invest in smart people solving hard problems “that really have the potential to change the world.”

I joined Thiel one recent Tuesday afternoon for a videoconference to review a pair of start-ups in his portfolio. In his little box on the Zoom screen, he looked bored.

Daniel Yu, connecting from Zanzibar, made a short, lucid presentation. His company, Wasoko, was an ecommerce platform for mom-and-pop stores in Africa, supplying shopkeepers with rice, soap, toilet paper, and other basics. Africa is the fastest-

urbanizing region in the world, and Wasoko's gross margin had doubled since last year.

Thiel was looking down at his briefing papers. He read something about Wasoko becoming “the Alibaba of Africa”—a pet peeve. “Anything that's the something of somewhere is the nothing of nowhere,” he said, a little sourly.

Next up was a company called Laika Mascotas, in Bogotá. Someone on the call described it as the Chewy of Latin America. Thiel frowned. The company delivered pet supplies directly to the homes of consumers. It had quadrupled its revenues every year for three years. The CEO, Camilo Sánchez Villamarin, walked through the numbers. Thiel thanked him and signed off.

This was not what Thiel wanted to be doing with his time. Bodegas and dog food were making him money, apparently, but he had set out to invest in transformational technology that would advance the state of human civilization.

The trouble is not exactly that Thiel's portfolio is pedestrian or uninspired. Founders Fund has holdings in artificial intelligence, biotech, space exploration, and other cutting-edge fields. What bothers Thiel is that his companies are not taking enough big swings at big problems, or that they are striking out.

“It was harder than it looked,” Thiel said. “I'm not actually involved in enough companies that are growing a lot, that are taking our civilization to the next level.”

“Because you couldn't find those companies?” I asked.

“I couldn't find them,” he said. “I couldn't get enough of them to work.”

**I**N 2018, a Russian named Daniil Bisslinger handed Thiel his business card. The card described him as a foreign-service officer. Thiel understood otherwise. He believed that Bisslinger was an intelligence officer with the FSB, the successor to the Soviet KGB. (A U.S. intelligence official later told me Thiel was right. The Russian embassy in Berlin, where Bisslinger has been based, did not respond to

questions about him.)

Thiel received an invitation that day, and then again in January 2022, to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. No agenda was specified. Thiel had been fascinated by Putin's czarlike presence in a room in Davos years before, all "champagne and caviar, and you had sort of this gaggle of, I don't know, Mafia-like-looking oligarchs standing around him," he recalled, but he did not make the trip.

Instead, he reported the contact to the FBI, for which Thiel had become a confidential human source code-named "Philosopher." Thiel's role as an FBI informant, first reported by *Insider*, dated back to May 2021. Charles Johnson, a tech investor, right-wing attention troll, and longtime associate of Thiel's, told me he himself had become an FBI informant some time ago. Johnson introduced Thiel to FBI Special Agent Johnathan Buma.

A source with close knowledge of the relationship said Buma told Thiel that he did not want to know about Thiel's contacts with U.S. elected officials or political figures, which were beyond the FBI's investigative interests. Buma saw his interactions with Thiel, this source said, as strictly "a counterintelligence, anti-influence operation" directed at foreign governments.

Thiel responded to my questions about his FBI relationship with a terse "no comment." A close associate, speaking with Thiel's permission, said "it would be strange if Peter had never met with people from the deep state," including "three-letter agencies, especially given the fact that he founded Palantir 20 years ago."

Johnson told me he knows he has a reputation as a right-wing agitator, but said that he had fostered that image in order to gather information for the FBI and other government agencies. (He said he is now a supporter of President Joe Biden.) "I recognize that I'm an imperfect messenger," he said. He told me a great many things about Thiel and others that I could not verify, but knowledgeable sources confirmed his role in recruiting Thiel for Buma. He and Thiel have since fallen out. "We are taking a permanent break from one another," Thiel texted Johnson about a year ago.

“Starting now.”

In at least 20 hours of logged face-to-face meetings with Buma, Thiel reported on what he believed to be a Chinese effort to take over a large venture-capital firm, discussed Russian involvement in Silicon Valley, and suggested that Jeffrey Epstein—a man he had met several times—was an Israeli intelligence operative. (Thiel told me he thinks Epstein “was probably entangled with Israeli military intelligence” but was more involved with “the U.S. deep state.”)

Buma, according to a source who has seen his reports, once asked Thiel why some of the extremely rich seemed so open to contacts with foreign governments. “And he said that they’re bored,” this source said. “‘They’re bored.’ And I actually believe it. I think it’s that simple. I think they’re just bored billionaires.”

**I**N THIEL’S LOS ANGELES OFFICE, he has a sculpture that resembles a three-dimensional game board. *Ascent: Above the Nation State Board Game Display Prototype* is the New Zealander artist Simon Denny’s attempt to map Thiel’s ideological universe. The board features a landscape in the aesthetic of Dungeons & Dragons, thick with monsters and knights and castles. The monsters include an ogre labeled “Monetary Policy.” Near the center is a hero figure, recognizable as Thiel. He tilts against a lion and a dragon, holding a shield and longbow. The lion is labeled “Fair Elections.” The dragon is labeled “Democracy.” The Thiel figure is trying to kill them.

Thiel saw the sculpture at a gallery in Auckland in December 2017. He loved the piece, perceiving it, he told me, as “sympathetic to roughly my side” of the political spectrum. (In fact, the artist intended it as a critique.) At the same show, he bought a portrait of his friend Curtis Yarvin, an explicitly antidemocratic writer who calls for a strong-armed leader to govern the United States as a monarch. Thiel gave the painting to Yarvin as a gift.

When I asked Thiel to explain his views on democracy, he dodged the question. “I always wonder whether people like you ... use the word *democracy* when you like the

results people have and use the word *populism* when you don't like the results," he told me. "If I'm characterized as more pro-populist than the elitist *Atlantic* is, then, in that sense, I'm more pro-democratic."

This felt like a debater's riposte, not to be taken seriously. He had given a more honest answer before that: He told me that he no longer dwells on democracy's flaws, because he believes we Americans don't have one. "We are not a democracy; we're a republic," he said. "We're not even a republic; we're a constitutional republic."

He said he has no wish to change the American form of government, and then amended himself: "Or, you know, I don't think it's realistic for it to be radically changed." Which is not at all the same thing.

When I asked what he thinks of Yarvin's autocratic agenda, Thiel offered objections that sounded not so much principled as practical.

"I don't think it's going to work. I think it will look like Xi in China or Putin in Russia," Thiel said, meaning a malign dictatorship. "It ultimately I don't think will even be accelerationist on the science and technology side, to say nothing of what it will do for individual rights, civil liberties, things of that sort."

Still, Thiel considers Yarvin an "interesting and powerful" historian. "One of the big things that he always talks about is the New Deal and FDR in the 1930s and 1940s," Thiel said. "And the heterodox take is that it was sort of a light form of fascism in the United States."

Franklin D. Roosevelt, in this reading of history, used a domineering view of executive authority, a compliant Congress, and an intimidated Supreme Court to force what Thiel called "very, very drastic change in the nature of our society." Yarvin, Thiel said, argues that "you should embrace this sort of light form of fascism, and we should have a president who's like FDR again."

It would be hard to find an academic historian to endorse the view that fascism, light or otherwise, accounted for Roosevelt's presidential power. But I was interested in

something else: Did Thiel agree with Yarvin's vision of fascism as a desirable governing model? Again, he dodged the question.

"That's not a realistic political program," he said, refusing to be drawn any further.

**L**OOKING BACK on Trump's years in office, Thiel walked a careful line. He was disenchanted with the former president, who did not turn out to be the revolutionary Thiel had hoped he might be. A number of things were said and done that Thiel did not approve of. Mistakes were made. But Thiel was not going to refashion himself a Never Trumper in retrospect.

The first time Thiel and I spoke, I asked about the nature of his disappointment. Later, he referred back to that question in a way that suggested he felt constrained. "I have to somehow give the exact right answer, where it's like, 'Yeah, I'm somewhat disenchanted,'" he told me. "But throwing him totally under the bus? That's like, you know—I'll get yelled at by Mr. Trump. And if I don't throw him under the bus, that's—but—somehow, I have to get the tone exactly right."

Discouraged by Trump's performance, Thiel had quietly stepped aside in the 2020 election. He wrote no check to the second Trump campaign, and said little or nothing about it in public. He had not made any grand resolution to stay out. He just wasn't moved to get in.

Thiel knew, because he had read some of my previous work, that I think Trump's gravest offense against the republic was his attempt to overthrow the election. I asked how he thought about it.

From the January/February 2022 issue: Barton Gellman on Donald Trump's next coup

"Look, I don't think the election was stolen," he said. But then he tried to turn the discussion to past elections that might have been wrongly decided. Bush-Gore in 2000, for instance: Thiel thought Gore was probably the rightful victor. Before that, he'd gotten started on a riff about Kennedy-Nixon.



He came back to Trump's attempt to prevent the transfer of power. "I'll agree with you that it was not helpful," he said.

Trump's lies about the election were, however, a big issue in last year's midterms. Thiel was a major donor to J. D. Vance, who won his Senate race in Ohio, and Blake Masters, who lost in Arizona. Both ran as election deniers, as did many of the other House and Senate candidates Thiel funded that year. Thiel expressed no anxieties about their commitment to election denial.

But now, heading into 2024, he was getting out of politics again. Beyond his disappointment with Trump, there is another piece of the story, which Thiel reluctantly agreed to discuss. In July, *Puck* reported that Democratic operatives had been digging for dirt on Thiel since before the 2022 midterm elections, conducting opposition research into his personal life with the express purpose of driving him out of politics. (The reported leaders of the oppo campaign did not respond to my questions.) Among other things, the operatives are said to have interviewed a young model named Jeff Thomas, who told them he was having an affair with Thiel, and encouraged Thomas to talk to Ryan Grim, a reporter for *The Intercept*. Grim did not publish a story during election season, as the opposition researchers hoped he would, but he wrote about Thiel's affair in March, after Thomas died by suicide.

Thiel declined to comment on Thomas's death, citing the family's request for privacy. He deplored the dirt-digging operation, telling me in an email that "the nihilism afflicting American politics is even deeper than I knew."

He also seemed bewildered by the passions he arouses on the left. "I don't think they should hate me this much," he said.

**O**N THE LAST THURSDAY in April, Thiel stood in a ballroom at the Metropolitan Club, one of New York's finest Gilded Age buildings. Decorative marble fireplaces accented the intricate panel work in burgundy and gold, all beneath Renaissance-style ceiling murals. Thiel had come to receive an award from *The New Criterion*, a conservative magazine of literature and politics, and

to bask in the attention of nearly 300 fans.

These were Thiel's people, and he spoke at the closed-press event with a lot less nuance than he had in our interviews. His after-dinner remarks were full of easy applause lines and in-jokes mocking the left. Universities had become intellectual wastelands, obsessed with a meaningless quest for diversity, he told the crowd. The humanities writ large are "transparently ridiculous," said the onetime philosophy major, and "there's no real science going on" in the sciences, which have devolved into "the enforcement of very curious dogmas."

Thiel reprised his longtime critique of "the diversity myth." He made a plausible point about the ideological monoculture of the DEI industry: "You don't have real diversity," he said, with "people who look different but talk and think alike." Then he made a crack that seemed more revealing.

"Diversity—it's not enough to just hire the extras from the space-cantina scene in *Star Wars*," he said, prompting laughter.

Nor did Thiel say what genuine diversity would mean. The quest for it, he said, is "very evil and it's very silly." Evil, he explained, because "the silliness is distracting us from very important things," such as the threat to U.S. interests posed by the Chinese Communist Party.

His closing, which used the same logic, earned a standing ovation.

"Whenever someone says 'DEI,'" he exhorted the crowd, "just think 'CCP.'"

Somebody asked, in the Q&A portion of the evening, whether Thiel thought the woke left was deliberately advancing Chinese Communist interests. Thiel answered with an unprompted jab at a fellow billionaire.

"It's always the difference between an agent and asset," he said. "And an agent is someone who is working for the enemy in full mens rea. An asset is a useful idiot. So even if you ask the question 'Is Bill Gates China's top agent, or top asset, in the

U.S.?”—here the crowd started roaring—“does it really make a difference?”

**T**HIEL SOMETIMES USES GATES as a foil in his public remarks, so I asked him what he thought of the Giving Pledge, the campaign Gates conceived in 2010—with his then-wife, Melinda French Gates, and Warren Buffett—to persuade billionaires to give away more than half their wealth to charitable causes. (Disclosure: One of my sons works for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.) About 10 years ago, Thiel told me, a fellow venture capitalist called to broach the question. Vinod Khosla, a co-founder of Sun Microsystems, had made the Giving Pledge a couple of years before. Would Thiel be willing to talk with Gates about doing the same?

“I don’t want to waste Bill Gates’s time,” Thiel replied.

Thiel feels that giving his billions away would be too much like admitting he had done something wrong to acquire them. The prevailing view in Europe, he said, and more and more in the United States, “is that philanthropy is something an evil person does.” It raises a question, he said: “What are you atoning for?”

He also lacked sympathy for the impulse to spread resources from the privileged to those in need. When I mentioned the terrible poverty and inequality around the world, he said, “I think there are enough people working on that.”

And besides, a different cause moves him far more.

**O**NE NIGHT IN 1999, or possibly 2000, Thiel went to a party in Palo Alto with Max Levchin, where they heard a pitch for an organization called the Alcor Life Extension Foundation.

Alcor was trying to pioneer a practical method of biostasis, a way to freeze the freshly dead in hope of revivification one day. Don’t picture the reanimation of an old, enfeebled corpse, enthusiasts at the party told Levchin. “The idea, of course, is that long before we know how to revive dead people, we would learn how to repair your cellular membranes and make you young and virile and beautiful and muscular, and

then we'll revive you," Levchin recalled.

Levchin found the whole thing morbid and couldn't wait to get out of there. But Thiel signed up as an Alcor client.

Should Thiel happen to die one day, best efforts notwithstanding, his arrangements with Alcor provide that a cryonics team will be standing by. The moment he is declared legally dead, medical technicians will connect him to a machine that will restore respiration and blood flow to his corpse. This step is temporary, meant to protect his brain and slow "the dying process."

"The patient," as Alcor calls its dead client, "is then cooled in an ice water bath, and their blood is replaced with an organ preservation solution." Next, ideally within the hour, Thiel's remains will be whisked to an operating room in Scottsdale, Arizona. A medical team will perfuse cryoprotectants through his blood vessels in an attempt to reduce the tissue damage wrought by extreme cold. Then his body will be cooled to –196 degrees Celsius, the temperature of liquid nitrogen. After slipping into a double-walled, vacuum-insulated metal coffin, alongside (so far) 222 other corpsicles, "the patient is now protected from deterioration for theoretically thousands of years," Alcor literature explains.

All that will be left for Thiel to do, entombed in this vault, is await the emergence of some future society that has the wherewithal and inclination to revive him. And then make his way in a world in which his skills and education and fabulous wealth may be worth nothing at all.

Thiel knows that cryonics "is still not working that well." When flesh freezes, he said, neurons and cellular structures get damaged. But he figures cryonics is "better than the alternative"—meaning the regular kind of death that nobody comes back from.

Of course, if he had the choice, Thiel would prefer not to die in the first place. In the 2000s, he became enamored with the work of Aubrey de Grey, a biomedical gerontologist from England who predicted that science would soon enable someone to live for a thousand years. By the end of that span, future scientists would have

devised a way to extend life still further, and so on to immortality.

A charismatic figure with a prodigious beard and a doctorate from Cambridge, de Grey resembled an Orthodox priest in mufti. He preached to Thiel for hours at a time about the science of regeneration. De Grey called his research program SENS, short for “strategies for engineered negligible senescence.”

Thiel gave several million dollars to de Grey’s Methuselah Foundation and the SENS Research Foundation, helping fund a lucrative prize for any scientist who could stretch the life span of mice to unnatural lengths. Four such prizes were awarded, but no human applications have yet emerged.

I wondered how much Thiel had thought through the implications for society of extreme longevity. The population would grow exponentially. Resources would not. Where would everyone live? What would they do for work? What would they eat and drink? Or—let’s face it—would a thousand-year life span be limited to men and women of extreme wealth?

“Well, I maybe self-serve,” he said, perhaps understating the point, “but I worry more about stagnation than about inequality.”

Thiel is not alone among his Silicon Valley peers in his obsession with immortality. Oracle’s Larry Ellison has described mortality as “incomprehensible.” Google’s Sergey Brin aspires to “cure death.” Dmitry Itskov, a leading tech entrepreneur in Russia, has said he hopes to live to 10,000.

If anything, Thiel thinks about death more than they do—and kicks himself for not thinking about it enough. “I should be investing way more money into this stuff,” he told me. “I should be spending way more time on this.”

And then he made an uncomfortable admission about that frozen death vault in Scottsdale, dipping his head and giving a half-smile of embarrassment. “I don’t know if that would actually happen,” he said. “I don’t even know where the contracts are, where all the records are, and so—and then of course you’d have to have the people

around you know where to do it, and they'd have to be informed. And I haven't broadcast it."

You haven't told your husband? Wouldn't you want him to sign up alongside you?

"I mean, I will think about that," he said, sounding rattled. "I will think—I have not thought about that."

He picked up his hand and gestured. Stop. Enough about his family.

Thiel already does a lot of things to try to extend his life span: He's on a Paleo diet; he works out with a trainer. He suspects that nicotine is a "really good nootropic drug that raises your IQ 10 points," and is thinking about adding a nicotine patch to his regimen. He has spoken of using human-growth-hormone pills to promote muscle mass. Until recently he was taking semaglutide, the drug in Ozempic; lately he has switched to a weekly injection of Mounjaro, an antidiabetic drug commonly used for weight loss. He doses himself with another antidiabetic, metformin, because he thinks it has a "significant effect in suppressing the cancer risk."

In the HBO series *Silicon Valley*, one of the characters (though not the one widely thought to be modeled on Thiel) had a "blood boy" who gave him regular transfusions of youthful serum. I thought Thiel would laugh at that reference, but he didn't.

"I've looked into all these different, I don't know, somewhat heterodox things," he said, noting that parabiosis, as the procedure is called, seems to slow aging in mice. He wishes the science were more advanced. No matter how fervent his desire, Thiel's extraordinary resources still can't buy him the kind of "super-duper medical treatments" that would let him slip the grasp of death. It is, perhaps, his ultimate disappointment.

"There are all these things I can't do with my money," Thiel said.

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