

ELECTION 2016

# Billionaire Peter Thiel Speaks at GOP Convention

Co-founder of PayPal makes history identifying himself as gay from GOP stage

*By Beth Reinhard and Rebecca Ballhaus*

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Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel addressed the Republican National Convention as a lonely representative of two groups that haven't been friendly to Donald Trump's campaign: the high-tech industry and the gay community.

Mr. Thiel, the co-founder of PayPal and the first outside investor in Facebook, was the first person ever at a GOP convention to declare from the stage that he is gay. His peers in the tech industry, meanwhile, are largely backing Democrat Hillary Clinton, and more than 150 tech executives published an open letter to Mr. Trump earlier this month criticizing his campaign.

Mr. Thiel's declaration came in prime time, shortly before Mr. Trump's widely anticipated acceptance of his party's nomination.

"I am proud to be gay. I am proud to be a Republican," he said.

The economic message over three days of the Republican convention had turned in large part on reviving the coal industry, manufacturing and small business. Mr. Thiel was the first prominent speaker from the technology world.

Mr. Thiel cast himself as someone who supports workers "who are building new things, from social networks to rocket ships." He contrasted the ingenuity of Silicon Valley with the perceived dysfunction and incompetence of the federal government, saying that government technology had declined since the eras of the Manhattan Project and Apollo program.

The inclusion of Mr. Thiel in the closing night program was another sign of Mr. Trump's efforts to shake up the GOP. Unlike other Republican nominees, the New York businessman has played down his opposition to same-sex marriage and vowed to protect the gay community from attacks after the June mass shootings at an Orlando gay nightclub.



Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal, delivers a speech at the Republican National Convention on Thursday. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Some gay community leaders remain skeptical, pointing to a party platform that they say includes antigay bias and to Mr. Trump's selection of Indiana Gov. Mike Pence, a staunch social conservative, as his running mate.

Other gay leaders view Mr. Trump as the friendliest GOP nominee in their lifetime.

"The platform is a meaningless document. What matters is what our nominee Donald Trump believes," said Chris Barron, who started a pro-Trump gay group called LGBTrump. "This is a great leap forward for the Republican Party under Donald Trump."

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Mr. Thiel will be the first openly gay person to address a GOP convention since 2000, when then-Rep. Jim Kolbe spoke over objections from the Texas delegation. Neither he nor Stephen Fong, a member of a Republican, gay-rights group from California who spoke at the 1996 convention, identified themselves as gay in their convention speeches.

Mr. Thiel, who donated \$2 million to a super PAC backing one of Mr. Trump's former rivals, ex-Hewlett Packard chief executive Carly Fiorina, has no current plans to donate to Mr. Trump's campaign or a friendly super PAC, a spokesman said.

"Peter is a brilliant entrepreneur and we are grateful for his support," said Hope Hicks, a spokeswoman for Mr. Trump.

Mr. Thiel caused a stir in Silicon Valley earlier this year when reports disclosed that he had spent \$10 million secretly funding a legal campaign against Gawker Media because he believed the outlet violated the privacy of people who couldn't easily fight back. His fight with Gawker notwithstanding, Mr. Thiel has also been a supporter of press freedom, donating to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Mr. Thiel and his foundation started a fellowship that provides two-year grants to young people to drop out and pursue ambitious ideas.

A vocal libertarian, he has a history of backing some unusual causes.

One organization, the Seasteading Institute, which received \$216,000 from his charity in 2014, according to an Internal Revenue Service filing, hopes to create ocean-borne cities outside the reach of governments.

In 2009, he wrote an essay for a blog affiliated with the libertarian think tank Cato Institute in which he said that extending the right to vote to women in 1920 and expanding the welfare state had “rendered the notion of ‘capitalist democracy’ into an oxymoron.”

In response to the criticism that generated, Mr. Thiel later updated the essay to clarify that he didn’t want to take away women’s right to vote, but added: “I have little hope that voting will make things better.”

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