

# Peter Thiel: From Libertarian Tech Icon to New Right Power Broker

**Peter Thiel** – co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, and early Facebook investor – has evolved from a libertarian Silicon Valley entrepreneur into an influential (and controversial) figure shaping America's new right politics <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. With an estimated net worth over \$20 billion, Thiel has leveraged his fortune to back ideologies and candidates that challenge political norms <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>. This comprehensive review traces Thiel's public trajectory: his early ventures and writings, the development of his anti-democratic ideas, his relationships with Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and J.D. Vance, and how his money has fueled a budding post-liberal movement. We examine how Thiel's intellectual journey – from championing libertarian tech innovation to bankrolling “national conservative” protégés – supports or contradicts the hypothesis that he is the strategic architect of a post-Trump succession plan centered on J.D. Vance.

## Early Ventures and Libertarian Beginnings

Peter Thiel's formative years combined elite education with contrarian activism. Born in Germany in 1967 and raised in the US, Thiel was a math prodigy turned philosopher at Stanford <sup>3</sup>. At Stanford, he co-founded *The Stanford Review*, a conservative student newspaper challenging political correctness. In 1995 he even co-authored *The Diversity Myth*, attacking multiculturalism in academia <sup>4</sup>. Thiel's first career steps were conventional – a law clerkship and Wall Street stint – but he soon pivoted to tech entrepreneurship. In 1998 he co-founded **PayPal**, envisioning an online payments revolution free from government interference <sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup>. PayPal's success (sold to eBay in 2002 for \$1.5B) minted Thiel's wealth and forged the famed “PayPal Mafia” network of tech founders, including Elon Musk <sup>7</sup> <sup>8</sup>. Their startup battles with regulators instilled a lasting libertarian streak: Thiel and his cohort believed government “overregulation and bureaucratic resistance” stifled innovation, a lesson that shaped their free-market, anti-government outlook <sup>9</sup>.

After PayPal, Thiel founded **Clarium Capital** (a hedge fund) and **Palantir Technologies** (a big-data analytics firm) in 2003 <sup>10</sup>. He became known as an “angel” investor with a Midas touch, most famously turning a \$500,000 Facebook stake into billions <sup>11</sup>. Through the 2000s, Thiel epitomized Silicon Valley libertarianism – **pro-capitalism, pro-technology, and deeply skeptical of government**. He funded upstarts aiming to “disrupt” legacy systems and even dabbled in futurist ventures like life-extension science and artificial intelligence research <sup>12</sup> <sup>13</sup>. Yet even as his tech star rose, Thiel's writings grew pessimistic about liberal democracy's compatibility with freedom. In a 2004 essay “The Straussian Moment,” he argued 9/11 had upended the old political order, requiring a reexamination of modern governance <sup>14</sup>. This set the stage for the *radical shift* in Thiel's worldview that would soon follow.

## Disillusionment with Democracy and Technocratic Escape

By 2009, Thiel publicly declared his **disillusionment with democracy** – a striking stance for a onetime self-described “conservative libertarian” <sup>15</sup>. In an **essay for Cato Unbound** titled “*The Education of a Libertarian*,” Thiel concluded that politics was a futile endeavor and that **democracy had become**

**incompatible with liberty.** Citing the expansion of welfare and women's suffrage since 1920, Thiel wrote that **"the vast increase in welfare beneficiaries and the extension of the franchise to women... have rendered the notion of 'capitalist democracy' into an oxymoron."** He admitted his thinking had "changed radically" and that **"most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."** Instead, Thiel argued, libertarians should "find an escape from politics in all its forms" <sup>16</sup> . This provocative conclusion – that *democratic government is irredeemably at odds with freedom* – would animate Thiel's subsequent ventures.

Thiel's solution was to **bypass politics through technology and innovation.** In the same 2009 essay, he outlined **"three technological frontiers"** for creating new freer worlds: **cyberspace, outer space, and seasteading** <sup>17</sup> <sup>18</sup> . He had already backed each frontier: PayPal's vision was a new *"world currency, free from all government control"* <sup>6</sup> ; he funded private space ventures; and he gave \$1.25 million to the **Seasteading Institute** to build floating city-states on the ocean <sup>19</sup> . Thiel acknowledged these escapes might be only partial or long-term, but he believed technology was in a **"race between politics and technology"** that individuals could still influence <sup>20</sup> . His **ultimate faith lay in technologists, not politicians,** to "build the machinery of freedom" and *"make the world safe for capitalism"* <sup>20</sup> . This technoutopian strategy was a natural extension of Thiel's Silicon Valley mindset: **if democracy couldn't guarantee freedom, invent a new framework that could.**

It's important to note that Thiel's skepticism of democracy was **intellectual, not merely cynical.** He did *not* advocate revoking voting rights – he clarified it would be "absurd" to rescind women's suffrage or disenfranchise any group <sup>21</sup> . Rather, he argued voting itself "will not make things better" and that *"politics is way too intense,"* dragging society into endless conflict <sup>22</sup> . His critique was that the democratic process inherently empowered anti-libertarian impulses – a **"tyranny of the majority"** against entrepreneurial freedom. Thiel's remedy was to reduce reliance on politics altogether by **creating spaces beyond government's reach** (financial networks, virtual communities, private islands, etc.). This worldview positioned Thiel on the fringe of mainstream politics in the early 2010s – a rich libertarian funding sci-fi-esque projects – but it foreshadowed a sharper turn to come. As we'll see, **Thiel's antipathy to liberal democracy eventually aligned him with a burgeoning intellectual movement outright hostile to modern democratic governance.**

## From Libertarian to Post-Liberal: Thiel Embraces the New Right

By the late 2010s, Thiel's stance shifted from *escaping* democracy to **confronting and reshaping it.** He began espousing **nationalist and post-liberal ideas** that he once shunned. Thiel himself noted he had moved toward **"national conservatism"** – a populist, sovereignty-focused outlook – and criticized the libertarian orthodoxy on free trade and *"big tech"* monopolies <sup>23</sup> . This evolution was catalyzed by Thiel's engagement with a younger cohort of right-wing intellectuals often dubbed the **"New Right."** No longer content to ignore politics, Thiel started *funding* and *fraternizing* with those seeking to upend the liberal democratic order he disdained.

A key moment was Thiel's involvement in the **National Conservatism Conference (NatCon)**, a gathering of thinkers uniting *"economically populist, culturally conservative, assertively nationalist"* ideas <sup>24</sup> . Thiel not only helped bankroll the inaugural NatCon in 2019 – he gave its opening address – but also became a celebrity patron of the New Right scene <sup>25</sup> . *Vanity Fair* reported that Thiel is regarded as something of a *"nefarious godfather or a genial rich uncle"* to this movement, with podcasters and bloggers joking about winning **"Thielbucks"** to support their projects <sup>26</sup> . Indeed, Thiel has quietly funded ventures like a post-liberal film

festival and publications in this milieu <sup>25</sup> . Whereas in the past Thiel channeled money into abstract tech escapism, now he was investing in **ideological infrastructure** – the thinkers and institutions openly challenging liberal democracy.

Crucially, Thiel also forged ties with the movement's intellectual lodestars, notably **Curtis Yarvin** (aka "Mencius Moldbug") – the ex-programmer whose neo-monarchist blog **popularized the New Right's anti-democratic philosophy – and other figures blending tech and reactionary thought** <sup>27</sup> . *Vanity Fair* notes that Thiel, J.D. Vance, and Blake Masters (more on them soon) are **"all friends with Curtis Yarvin", who has been called the "house political philosopher" of Thiel's circle** <sup>27</sup> . Yarvin advocates replacing messy democracy with CEO-like sovereigns – a vision not far removed from Thiel's long-held yearning for **"order and freedom" without popular rule. This convergence of Thiel's network with neoreactionary ideas marks a striking turn: the once-libertarian entrepreneur now consorted with people who openly seek to "overthrow the thrust of progress"**<sup>\*\*</sup> and roll back liberal institutions <sup>28</sup> .

Thiel's growing alliance with **post-liberal Catholic thinkers** also signaled his shift. Although Thiel is not Catholic (he's described himself as Christian in general <sup>29</sup> ), he found common cause with Catholic intellectuals who deem liberalism a failed project. He began funding or networking with scholars like **Patrick Deneen, Sohrab Ahmari, and Adrian Vermeule**, who argue that America's commitment to individual rights and pluralism has led to social decay <sup>30</sup> <sup>31</sup> . These **"post-liberal Catholics"** call for grounding society in the **"common good"** and even **"regime change"** to uproot liberal elites <sup>32</sup> <sup>33</sup> . Thiel's own writings had hinted at similar themes – for example, he mused that the great achievements of Western civilization sprang from *Christian-theological* foundations, whereas liberal democracy's secular individualism bred **"meaninglessness and inertia"** <sup>34</sup> . By late 2010s, Thiel was echoing nationalist and civilizational rhetoric. In 2019 he lambasted Google's work in China as **"seemingly treasonous"** and warned that globalist tech elites were selling out the West <sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup> . He also complained that **"theocratic"** adversaries like China were advancing while U.S. democracy dithered – reinforcing his belief that only bold, centralized action (in government or business) could revitalize society <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> .

**In sum, by 2020 Thiel had completed a journey from libertarian enfant terrible to patron of an emergent anti-liberal right.** He funneled millions into think tanks, conferences, and most significantly, **political candidates** aligned with these post-liberal, tech-infused ideals. This brings us to Thiel's relationships with three pivotal figures – **Donald Trump, Elon Musk, and J.D. Vance** – which illustrate how his ideas intersected with real-world power. Through these relationships, Thiel moved from theorizing about "escaping politics" to actively attempting to **reengineer politics**.

## Alliance and Tension with Donald Trump

Thiel's *entrée* into national politics came with a splash: in 2016 he became one of the few Silicon Valley titans to openly support **Donald Trump's presidential campaign**. This surprised many, as Thiel had never been a party-line Republican donor before (his contributions had ranged from Ron Paul to Ted Cruz to even a Democrat or two) <sup>39</sup> <sup>40</sup> . But Trump's anti-establishment populism struck a chord with Thiel, who saw **"fake culture wars"** distracting America from decline <sup>41</sup> . Speaking on the main stage of the **Republican National Convention** in July 2016, Thiel declared **"I am proud to be gay. I am proud to be a Republican. But most of all I am proud to be an American,"** earning roaring applause <sup>42</sup> <sup>43</sup> . He broke with GOP orthodoxy by dismissing fights over **"who gets to use which bathroom"** as trivial, and instead echoed Trump's message that the country was economically stagnant and technologically falling behind. **"Our nuclear bases still use floppy disks. ... We don't accept such incompetence in Silicon Valley, and we must not accept it from our**

**government,”** Thiel scolded, in a line that captured both his tech-driven perspective and his support for Trump as a disruptor of the status quo <sup>44</sup> <sup>45</sup> . He then enthusiastically endorsed Trump, urging Americans to “*stand up and vote for Donald Trump*” as the leader to restore a “*bright future*” <sup>46</sup> .

After Trump's surprise victory, Thiel became an **informal adviser and power broker** in the incoming administration. He donated **\$1.25 million** to pro-Trump efforts in 2016 (including a \$1 million gift to a Trump Super PAC) <sup>47</sup> and was rewarded with a seat on the transition team's executive committee. From that perch, Thiel acted as a bridge between Trump's circle and Silicon Valley <sup>8</sup> . He floated names of like-minded tech allies for key posts – for instance, lobbying for his colleague Jim O'Neill (a libertarian who favored radical FDA deregulation) to lead the FDA, and tapping his Chief of Staff Michael Kratsios to shape tech policy <sup>48</sup> . Several “**Thiel network**” figures entered the administration: one was **Trae Stephens**, a partner at Thiel's Founders Fund, who was considered for Deputy Defense Secretary <sup>48</sup> ; another was **Kevin Harrington**, a Thiel associate who joined the National Security Council. Palantir, Thiel's data firm, which had struggled for government contracts under prior administrations, suddenly landed major deals, including a \$876 million Army contract in 2019 and later a ~\$10 billion Army data platform agreement <sup>49</sup> <sup>50</sup> . Thiel's clout led some to dub him the “*Don*” of a new tech-aligned GOP faction <sup>51</sup> .

However, Thiel's enthusiasm for Trump was **tempered by disappointment** as the administration progressed. By 2020, reports emerged that Thiel was unhappy with the “*disorderly*” handling of policy and the failure to pursue bold techno-libertarian objectives <sup>52</sup> . He had backed Trump hoping for a transformative assault on the “*administrative state*” and big projects like revamped infrastructure or nuclear energy deregulation <sup>53</sup> . Instead, Trump's term often devolved into culture-war posturing and personal scandals. Thiel lamented that even his “*initial low expectations*” of Trump were not met <sup>37</sup> . In an Atlantic interview, he said Trump's presidency “*failed*” and called Trump more of a “*clown*” than a competent change agent <sup>54</sup> . According to that interview, by 2023 Thiel concluded that **Trump's populist rise was useful chiefly as “disruption,” a prelude to a true rebuilding by more serious figures** <sup>53</sup> . Thiel “indicated that Trump and the populists were a disruptive factor that would prepare the stage for the process of true rebuilding,” essentially clearing away old norms <sup>53</sup> . *Disruption without progress* was not enough – a sentiment that helps explain Thiel's turn to cultivating the next generation of leaders like J.D. Vance.

Notably, Thiel pointedly sat out Trump's 2020 re-election campaign and has kept his distance in 2024. In early 2023 Reuters reported (confirmed by Thiel to associates) that he “**has lost interest in democracy**” and would “**not be giving money to any politician, including Donald Trump, in the next presidential campaign.**” The primary reason given was Thiel's disgust with the GOP's focus on “*culture issues*” – an agenda he sees as low-value “*distractions*” <sup>55</sup> <sup>37</sup> . Indeed, back in 2016 Thiel warned that “*fake culture wars only distract us from our economic decline*” <sup>41</sup> , and he grew frustrated when the post-2016 Republican Party doubled down on culture wars (e.g. banning abortion, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric) at the expense of tech-forward policy. By withdrawing funding in 2024, Thiel implicitly signaled that his **strategic bet had shifted**: rather than prop up Trump's increasingly chaotic movement, he would invest in a more *ideologically focused successor* to carry forward the project of dismantling liberal democracy and implementing technocratic “*competence.*” This brings us to **J.D. Vance**, who many believe is Thiel's *hand-picked* apprentice for that role.

## Peter Thiel and Elon Musk: Contrasting Billionaire Allies

Before diving into Thiel's pivotal relationship with J.D. Vance, a brief note on his longtime association with **Elon Musk** provides context on Thiel's influence and priorities. Thiel and Musk famously go back to the **PayPal days** – though as co-founders they were more rivals-turned-colleagues than close friends. In 2000,

Musk's online banking startup X.com merged with Thiel's PayPal; a power struggle ensued in which Musk was ousted as CEO and Thiel took the helm <sup>56</sup>. Despite that early friction, both emerged fabulously wealthy from PayPal's sale and became pillars of the tech industry. Over time, **their ideological arcs have shown parallels**: both men are libertarian-leaning visionaries who grew critical of government and "woke" culture, yet both have eagerly courted government contracts and political influence when it suits them.

Thiel and Musk each poured their PayPal winnings into audacious ventures – Musk into Tesla and SpaceX, Thiel into Palantir and Founders Fund – sharing a belief that **technological innovation, not politics, drives human progress**. They also saw how government bureaucracy hampers that progress. As one account noted, their PayPal experience convinced them that **"bureaucratic resistance"** and overregulation were enemies of growth <sup>9</sup>. This fostered a *libertarian ethos* in the so-called "PayPal Mafia," including Musk, Thiel, and others, which still informs their approach to policy <sup>9</sup>. For example, both Musk and Thiel have advocated *less regulation of tech and crypto, and a more confrontational stance toward China's rise* <sup>57</sup> <sup>58</sup>. Both have also **profited from government**: Musk's companies (Tesla, SpaceX) received billions in federal contracts and subsidies, while Thiel's Palantir and defense startups likewise thrive on government deals <sup>59</sup> <sup>60</sup>. This creates a shared incentive to steer public policy in a tech-industry-friendly direction (e.g. looser environmental rules for Musk's ventures, or favorable defense spending for Thiel's).

In recent years, Musk has edged into Thiel's political lane, becoming an outspoken critic of liberal "élites" and aligning himself with right-wing and anti-establishment voices. Musk's takeover of Twitter (now X) in 2022 amplified culture-war clashes, and he frequently rails against what he calls the "woke mind virus." Thiel and Musk now find themselves **de facto allies in the culture wars**, even if not formally coordinated. They have **overlapping networks** – for instance, investor David Sacks (a Thiel confidant) is also close to Musk and served as an intermediary in Musk's political forays <sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup>. In 2023, Musk hosted Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's campaign launch on Twitter and signaled support for certain Republicans, showing a convergence with Thiel's project of disrupting the political status quo. Musk's and Thiel's names often appear together as tech magnates shaping a possible second Trump term: one analysis noted they (along with Sacks) would push for *"less regulation of tech, pro-cryptocurrency policies, [and] a less aggressive antitrust stance"* from within the GOP <sup>63</sup>.

That said, **Thiel and Musk differ in style and degree of political engagement**. Musk's involvement is more ad-hoc and personality-driven (e.g. friendly with Trump but also fickle), whereas Thiel has a more systematic long-game in mind. Thiel tends to work behind the scenes, cultivating intellectual frameworks and **grooming specific candidates** (like Vance and Blake Masters) who can carry out his vision. Musk, by contrast, has not created an ideological cadre – his "influence" is largely via his personal megaphone and shifting whims (at one point he signaled support for Kanye West's quixotic presidential bid, then for DeSantis, etc.). Nonetheless, the two men's trajectories illustrate how **Thiel's core ideas have penetrated the broader tech elite**. Concepts like government as inefficient and in need of disruptive reform, or the primacy of technological advancement over consensus politics, are now mainstream among Silicon Valley rebels. Musk's rise as a political voice reinforces, rather than undermines, Thiel's goals: both men want a future where *engineers and entrepreneurs, not bureaucrats, drive policy*. It is telling that in Thiel's vision of a post-Trump Republican Party, **figures like Musk are part of the orbit** – indeed Trump in 2023 praised Musk at rallies and promised to *"make life good for our smart people"* in tech <sup>64</sup> <sup>62</sup>. As we turn to Thiel's mentorship of J.D. Vance, keep in mind this tech-power nexus: Thiel sees allies like Musk (however mercurial) as helping pave the way for a new political order that prioritizes **technocratic competence and civilizational "rebuilding"** over the old democratic norms.

## Mentor, Financier, Kingmaker: Thiel and J.D. Vance

*J.D. Vance (left) – a Yale-educated venture capitalist turned “America First” politician – owes much of his rapid rise to Peter Thiel (right), who invested in Vance’s career early and heavily backed his entry into politics <sup>65</sup> <sup>66</sup>. Thiel’s strategic cultivation of Vance is a case study in how his ideological and financial influence converges on a single protégé.*

If any individual embodies Thiel’s bid to **engineer a post-Trump succession**, it is **J.D. Vance**. Now 39, Vance is an Ivy League-trained lawyer-turned-author-turned-politician whose transformation from Trump-critic to MAGA standard-bearer was midwived by Thiel at every step. Thiel’s relationship with Vance began over a decade ago and has intensified to the point that observers say **“for Peter, Vance is a generational bet.”** <sup>67</sup>. Here’s how Thiel nurtured Vance’s ascent:

- **2011 – First Encounter:** Vance was a law student at Yale when Thiel came to campus to give a talk. By Vance’s own account, Thiel’s lecture was *“the most significant moment”* of his Yale years <sup>68</sup> <sup>69</sup>. Thiel impressed upon the students that **chasing elite credentials could lead to “existential emptiness”** and that society was mired in *“technological stagnation”* despite superficial digital progress <sup>70</sup> <sup>71</sup>. He lamented a world that could produce Twitter but not cure dementia or achieve energy breakthroughs – a direct challenge to Yale’s meritocratic pipeline. This message **struck a chord with Vance**, a Marine veteran from working-class Ohio who was searching for purpose. Thiel’s critique of *“the unthinking demos”* and stagnating establishment lit an intellectual spark. After the talk, Vance emailed Thiel, and Thiel, sensing a kindred spirit, responded warmly <sup>72</sup> <sup>73</sup>. This opened the door for Vance into Thiel’s circle.
- **2014–2016 – Entering Thiel’s Network:** At Thiel’s encouragement, Vance moved to Silicon Valley. An associate of Thiel’s arranged for Vance to take a job at a biotech startup (even though Vance had no science background) just to get his foot in the door of tech <sup>74</sup>. Vance soon approached Thiel’s venture firm **Mithril Capital** with an investment idea. Mithril passed on that deal – but they were so impressed by Vance’s insight and *“knack for checking in at the right time”* that they **“knew we needed to hire him,”** recalls Mithril managing director Colin Greenspon <sup>75</sup>. Thus in **2016**, Thiel hired Vance as a **principal at Mithril Capital**, despite Vance’s scant investment experience <sup>76</sup> <sup>77</sup>. It was a classic Thiel move: value raw talent and worldview alignment over résumé. Vance’s stint at Mithril (2016–17) made him financially secure – Thiel “made him wealthy” through this role <sup>67</sup> – and, more importantly, **indoctrinated him in Silicon Valley’s contrarian, start-up ethos** <sup>78</sup>. Vance mingled with billionaire investors and absorbed the idea that nimble tech innovation could solve social ills better than any government program <sup>79</sup>. This was also when Vance wrote *Hillbilly Elegy* (published mid-2016), his memoir about Rust Belt struggles, which became a bestseller and vaulted him to national prominence <sup>67</sup>. Thiel and his allies recognized Vance’s unique appeal: an *“omnivorous intellect”* with working-class bona fides who could translate between *coastal elites* and *heartland populists* <sup>67</sup> <sup>80</sup>.
- **2017–2019 – Launching Vance’s Venture Fund:** In 2017, Vance heeded Thiel’s advice to “go back home” to Ohio (perhaps to build political roots) <sup>81</sup>. Thiel continued to back him. In late 2019, Vance co-founded **Narya Capital**, a Cincinnati-based venture capital fund – and Thiel was the *cornerstone investor*. Thiel supplied **at least 15% of Narya’s initial \$93 million fund** (and likely coordinated other investors) <sup>82</sup>. Other tech magnates like Marc Andreessen and even Google’s ex-CEO Eric Schmidt joined in Narya’s financing <sup>83</sup>, underscoring that Thiel had rallied a *“Silicon Valley*

*billionaires' club*" behind Vance. The name "Narya" (a Tolkien reference – Thiel and Vance are both *Lord of the Rings* fans) hints at the mission: patient, long-view investments outside the coastal bubble<sup>84</sup>. Running Narya gave Vance further credibility as a "tech entrepreneur" in flyover country, aligning with Thiel's vision of *seeding innovation in America's heartland*.

- **2021–2022 – Entering Politics (with \$15M from Thiel):** By 2021, it was clear that Thiel saw Vance as the vehicle for his political hopes. That year Vance decided to run for an open U.S. Senate seat in Ohio – a path he **might not have taken without Thiel's prodding and support**. Thiel immediately put in **\$10 million** (later increasing to **\$15 million**) to launch a Super PAC, "**Protect Ohio Values**," boosting Vance's candidacy<sup>85</sup><sup>86</sup>. This was "*the largest individual contribution to a single Senate race ever recorded*"<sup>87</sup>, a jaw-dropping sum that **made Thiel by far Vance's biggest donor**. It wasn't just Thiel: his network followed suit. Tech investor David Sacks (another PayPal Mafia alum) gave \$900,000 to Vance's PAC<sup>85</sup>, and others like Andreessen chipped in. The *Guardian* noted that Thiel's funds "opened the floodgates" for a new wave of Silicon Valley political spending, replacing Trump's traditional industry backers with tech elites<sup>88</sup><sup>87</sup>. With Thiel's money and endorsement, Vance won a contentious Republican primary in 2022 – overcoming opponents who had far more local political experience but lacked Thiel's backing. In the general election, Vance captured the Senate seat, validating Thiel's investment. As one observer quipped, "*to say J.D. Vance owes his Senate seat to Peter Thiel is not an exaggeration*" – without Thiel, Vance was a political neophyte with no donor base<sup>89</sup><sup>90</sup>.

Thiel's influence on Vance has been **ideological as well as financial**. When Vance entered politics, he completed an astonishing metamorphosis in line with Thiel's own trajectory. Recall that in 2016, Vance had been a "*Never Trump*" conservative, calling Trump "reprehensible" and worrying about the GOP embracing populist nationalism<sup>91</sup>. But by 2021, after years in Thiel's orbit, Vance flipped to full *America First* mode – apologizing for his past anti-Trump statements and championing the very populist causes he once mistrusted<sup>91</sup>. **Thiel's worldview seeped into Vance's rhetoric:** Vance began attacking "*the regime*" in Washington, decrying "*woke*" elites in government, Big Tech, academia, and finance as enemies of the people<sup>92</sup>. He called for a "*de-woke-ification*" of America's institutions<sup>92</sup>. In echo of Thiel's anti-bureaucracy bent, Vance proposed to "**fire every civil servant**" possible and replace them with loyalists – likening it to a "*de-Ba'athification*" program after a fallen regime<sup>93</sup>. (This extremist idea of purging the administrative state aligns with plans Thiel-backed operatives have floated for a future GOP administration.) Vance also took up Thiel's **techno-populist** themes: he blasts Big Tech monopolies like Google and Meta for abusing power, yet in the same breath he extols "*nimble startup*" firms (often funded by Thiel) as the solution<sup>94</sup><sup>95</sup>. He's a critic of social-media censorship but a booster of "fringe" alt-tech platforms (Thiel has invested in Rumble, an alternative to YouTube, and Vance has praised such efforts to bypass mainstream tech)<sup>25</sup><sup>2</sup>. On foreign policy, Vance's "*America First*" stance – e.g. opposing aid to Ukraine and preferring a pact with Russia<sup>96</sup> – mirrors Thiel's long-held skepticism of globalist intervention and focus on China as a bigger threat. Vance even floated giving parents extra voting power and lamented "childless elites," reflecting a post-liberal *natalist* concern that technocrats like Thiel (who has spoken about declining birth rates) empathize with<sup>97</sup><sup>98</sup>.

By 2023-24, Thiel's bet on Vance appeared to be paying off in influence. In an unprecedented move, **Donald Trump selected J.D. Vance as his vice-presidential running mate** for the 2024 campaign (a development many attribute largely to Thiel's advocacy)<sup>65</sup><sup>66</sup>. Reports revealed that **Thiel, Sacks, and others lobbied Trump hard behind the scenes to choose Vance**, pitching him as the candidate who could energize the base and interface with tech donors<sup>99</sup><sup>100</sup>. According to *The Washington Post*, in the weeks before Trump's

decision, Thiel and allies made “repeated calls” to Trump, “**imploing him to add [Vance] to the ticket**” <sup>99</sup>. They sold Trump on Vance’s utility: a MAGA convert with intellect and Silicon Valley bona fides who could help govern *competently*. Tech billionaire **Marc Andreessen** reportedly told Trump that choosing Vance would “*show the world the GOP is the party of the future*”. Trump ultimately agreed – a choice that “**was not just a monumental moment for J.D. Vance, but a defining moment in Peter Thiel’s career**” <sup>65</sup>. It signaled that Thiel’s long-term strategy of grooming a successor figure had reached the highest level.

With Vance as the would-be Vice President, Thiel’s influence in a prospective second Trump administration would be profound. **Vance is widely seen as Thiel’s emissary**, “*spreading a doctrine that government and entrenched corporate giants ... stifle innovation, while nimble, bold-thinking start-ups – especially [Thiel’s] own – can propel the national interest.*” <sup>101</sup> In other words, Vance in power means **Silicon Valley’s rebel wing in power**. Indeed, the *Post* reports that tech leaders were “*euphoric*” over Vance’s rise, viewing him as *their man in Washington* <sup>101</sup>. They have good reason: if Trump-Vance won, “*Vance could help transform the tech industry from political punching bag to engine of capitalism, filling government positions with ideologically aligned tech leaders.*” <sup>60</sup> Thiel-linked startups (like defense tech firm **Anduril**, where Vance invested through Narya) would be poised to gain billions in federal contracts <sup>60</sup>. Thiel himself would likely remain behind the curtain, but his **network of protégés** – people like Blake Masters (whom Thiel funded to run for Senate in 2022) and others – could populate a new administration. Masters has said that having someone like Vance in the White House would spur “*new Manhattan Project-level*” initiatives that the sclerotic current system can’t do <sup>102</sup>. It’s the consummation of Thiel’s technocratic dream: to “*seize the administrative state*” and run it with Silicon Valley efficiency and daring <sup>93</sup>.

## Thiel’s Political and Financial Footprint

Thiel’s journey would not matter so much if it weren’t backed by significant **financial firepower and institutional support**. Over the past decade, Thiel has put his money where his mouth is, emerging as one of the most important power brokers on the right. Here we catalog **what Thiel has done with his billions** in the political realm – the campaigns, causes, and networks he has bankrolled – and how those expenditures illuminate his priorities:

- **Campaign Contributions and “Thiel Network” Candidates:** Thiel’s direct federal donations before 2016 were modest – a few thousand to Ron Paul, Ted Cruz, and even Facebook’s PAC (he was on Facebook’s board) <sup>39</sup> <sup>103</sup>. That changed dramatically with Trump’s rise. In 2016 Thiel gave **over \$1.25 million** to support Trump (mostly via a Super PAC) <sup>47</sup>, instantly making him a top GOP donor. He followed up by heavily funding insurgent candidates in 2022: besides the ~\$15M to Vance’s PAC, Thiel poured **\$15M into a PAC for Blake Masters** (Arizona Senate candidate and Thiel’s longtime protégé) <sup>2</sup>. By early 2022, Thiel had donated more than **\$20.4 million** to Republican campaigns that cycle, “*supporting 16 Senate and House candidates, several of whom endorsed Trump’s false claims of 2020 election fraud.*” <sup>104</sup>. In short, Thiel became a **kingmaker for the MAGA wing**. Masters and Vance in particular were described as “*extensions of Thiel*” – not just recipients of his money but sharers of his worldview <sup>105</sup>. Thiel also bankrolled a PAC in 2020 for **Kris Kobach**, an anti-immigration firebrand, indicating Thiel’s alignment with hardline border policies <sup>106</sup>. Most recently, Thiel’s influence is credited with securing Vance the VP slot, reinforcing his “*long history of putting figures of his choosing onto a path of glory.*” <sup>107</sup>. In Republican finance circles, Thiel’s interventions are seen as strategic and purposeful – aimed at **shaping the GOP’s future roster** to be more nationalist, tech-oriented, and hostile to the administrative state <sup>105</sup>.



- **Think Tanks, Media, and Ideological Ventures:** Thiel has quietly financed numerous organizations that propagate his ideas. He has donated to the **Federalist Society** (a legal group that shares his aim of curbing government) and reportedly to the **Claremont Institute**, a once-mainstream conservative think tank that has taken a radical turn (Claremont gave Thiel a statesmanship award in 2019). He was a major funder of the **NatCon conferences** <sup>25</sup>. Thiel's giving extends to intellectual "scene" projects too: e.g., he funded the **New People's Cinema** festival in 2022, which showcased anti-woke and post-liberal films <sup>25</sup>. Through his *Thiel Foundation*, he's issued grants to edgy thinkers (for instance, he's supported projects by economist **Eric Weinstein** and anti-establishment journalists). In the tech realm, Thiel was an early backer of **Bitcoin and cryptocurrency** – reflecting his belief in financial systems beyond government reach. He reportedly accumulated large Bitcoin holdings and in 2022 told a cryptocurrency conference that **"central banks are bankrupt"** and that crypto is a tool for freedom <sup>57</sup>. His political donations followed suit: he has supported pro-crypto politicians and opposed regulations like those from the SEC. It's telling that one of the few policy initiatives under Trump that excited Thiel was an effort to **relax oversight of emerging technologies (like fintech, AI, and nuclear) to spur innovation** <sup>108</sup>. Even Thiel's infamous funding of Hulk Hogan's lawsuit that bankrupted *Gawker Media* in 2016 fits the pattern – it was a strike against a liberal media outlet that had outed him years before, demonstrating how Thiel is willing to **use his wealth to punish institutions he sees as corrupt or hostile to his values** <sup>109</sup>.
- **Silicon Valley-DC Pipeline:** Another facet of Thiel's influence is how he's built a **network of loyalists** who oscillate between his companies and government roles. We've mentioned some (Kratsios, etc.). Thiel also invested in up-and-coming defense startups like **Palmer Luckey's Anduril** and **Alex Karp's Palantir** which now serve as quasi-private extensions of a hawkish security agenda <sup>110</sup> <sup>35</sup>. By placing bets on companies that seek to supplant traditional government functions (intelligence analysis, border security tech, etc.), Thiel essentially furthers a form of **"private sector capture"** of public policy. This was highlighted when, in mid-2025, Palantir won a 10-year, \$10 billion Army contract and Anduril won a \$642 million Pentagon program – both under circumstances suggesting their deep connections to Thiel-aligned officials <sup>111</sup> <sup>112</sup>. While one *cannot prove* Vance or others pulled strings, it's clear Thiel's ecosystem is poised to thrive under friendly political leadership.

In summary, **Thiel has strategically deployed his capital to reshape the political landscape:** sponsoring candidates who share his skepticism of democracy, cultivating intellectual currents that legitimize authoritarian or technocratic governance, and reinforcing an alliance between right-wing politics and Silicon Valley's dissident entrepreneurs. His investments – whether in **cryptocurrency as an escape hatch from central banks**, or in **J.D. Vance as an instrument to overhaul Washington** – all reflect a coherent priority: **Thiel wants to weaken the liberal-democratic "status quo" and empower a new regime of aggressive problem-solvers (like himself) to lead America.** His **post-Trump succession plan**, if it exists, is less a formal conspiracy and more the natural culmination of these efforts.

## Conclusion: Architect of a Post-Trump Succession?

Is Peter Thiel the *"strategic architect"* of a systematic post-Trump political succession centered on J.D. Vance? The evidence assembled here provides **strong validation** for that hypothesis – albeit with some important nuances:

- **Thiel's Intent and Vision:** Thiel's own words and record show a consistent desire to overturn conventional democratic governance in favor of something more **efficient, centralized, and**

**aligned with his technocratic and post-liberal ideals.** Over 15 years ago, he signaled he “no longer believed freedom and democracy were compatible.” Today, through Vance, he has a vehicle to attempt what post-liberal Catholic theorist Patrick Deneen calls “*regime change*.” Thiel has **openly influenced Vance’s ideology**, inculcating in him the belief that liberal America is broken and that only a bold, possibly authoritarian recalibration can “rebuild” civilization <sup>53</sup>. The fact that Vance is *explicitly* connected to networks (Catholic integralists, neoreactionary tech bros) that Thiel helped foster indicates *intentional design*. Thiel isn’t just betting on any young politician; he’s betting on one who amalgamates **Thiel’s own heterodox influences** – a *Catholic post-liberal mind in a tech-savvy populist body*.

- **Financial and Strategic Execution:** Thiel’s unprecedented financing of Vance’s campaign (and advocacy to place him on the presidential ticket) underscores that this is a **project**, not happenstance. Thiel effectively *created* the political persona of J.D. Vance: funding his venture career, then his Senate run, and orchestrating support around him <sup>67</sup> <sup>65</sup>. This is beyond typical donor behavior. It resembles a **succession plan** in a company, where a CEO grooms a successor. Thiel’s role in nudging Trump to pick Vance for VP – reportedly calling in favors and mobilizing other donors – was the final masterstroke <sup>99</sup>. One GOP operative described Thiel as having “an outsize role in helping Vance’s career rocket” <sup>66</sup>, and indeed Thiel’s “**kingmaker**” reputation has only grown <sup>107</sup>. All of this was executed as Trump’s own star was dimming (amid electoral defeat and legal troubles). It suggests Thiel was ready to *leverage Trump’s vulnerability* to insert his protégé into the line of succession.
- **Intersecting Networks Supporting the Hypothesis:** The coming together of Thiel’s tech network and the New Right intellectual network around Vance is a potent indicator of orchestration. Vance sits at the nexus of **Thiel’s Silicon Valley allies (Sacks, Musk, Andreessen) and the post-liberal thinkers (Deneen, Vermeule)**. This “**convergence of Silicon Valley players at the height of political power**” in the GOP is no accident <sup>113</sup>. It reflects a shared plan to reorient the party’s priorities – away from Reaganite free-market optimism and toward a “*burn it down and rebuild*” mindset. Thiel is a central convenor of this convergence. Without his patronage, it’s unlikely someone like Vance – a first-term Senator with no prior political base – would be anointed the heir apparent to Trump. With Thiel’s backing, however, Vance brought tech billionaire credibility and serious money into Trump’s fold at a critical time, making himself indispensable. *Axios* even reported that after Vance’s VP nod, Thiel began warming up to funding Trump again, having gotten a “seat at the table” for his network’s interests <sup>114</sup> <sup>62</sup>.

All that said, it’s worth noting **nuances**. Thiel is not the only strategist eyeing a post-Trump GOP, and Vance is not a Manchurian candidate with no agency of his own. Vance’s alliance with Thiel is symbiotic: Vance genuinely subscribes to the ideas Thiel and others promote (his 2019 conversion to Catholicism was personal as well as political, for example), and he has cultivated ties with Ohio’s right-wing base too. In other words, **Thiel didn’t single-handedly invent J.D. Vance**, but he recognized and *molded* Vance’s potential to fit his design. Moreover, Thiel’s influence operates in a broader context of rising illiberal sentiment on the right – from grassroots populism to think tanks like Heritage embracing a “new Right” posture. Thiel is an architect, but he’s constructing with materials already on the ground (nationalist anger, religious conservatism, tech frustration with regulation).

One can argue that **Thiel’s project could yet be derailed**. If Trump loses in 2024 or if Vance falters on the national stage, Thiel’s investment might not fully pay off. Some Republicans remain wary of the Silicon

Valley libertarian streak that Thiel/Vance represent and prefer more traditional conservatism. Additionally, Thiel's own semi-withdrawal from direct funding in 2024 (due to GOP culture-war focus) suggests he's playing a careful long game – he's not blindly all-in on Trumpism if it doesn't advance his core aims <sup>55</sup>. In fact, Thiel may prefer Vance to ascend *after* the Trump era concludes chaotically, rather than hitching his vision to Trump's unpredictability. The hypothesis that Thiel is **"accelerating"** Vance's rise precisely because of Trump's vulnerabilities seems largely **validated by Thiel's actions**: he stepped into the vacuum in 2022–23 to push Vance forward at a time when Trump's future was uncertain. It's as if Thiel hedged – ensuring that whether Trump fizzles or flies, *Thiel's man* is positioned to carry the mantle of their shared agenda.

In conclusion, **Peter Thiel's public record reveals a deliberate and insight-driven effort to reshape American politics**. Over decades he evolved a coherent worldview – one deeply critical of liberal democracy and enamored with technocratic authority – and he methodically deployed resources to propagate that worldview. His relationships with Trump, Musk, and Vance each illustrate facets of this mission: with Trump, Thiel tried to infuse a chaotic populism with intellectual rigor and got mixed results; with Musk, he shares a parallel crusade to disrupt the old order via innovation; but with **J.D. Vance, Thiel appears to have found his ideal instrument – a leader who marries populist indignation with Thielian ideological depth**. It is not hyperbole to call Thiel an **architect** of the new right. As one profile aptly put it, Thiel has transcended being a mere donor to become the *"Don" of a new era* in GOP politics <sup>51</sup>. If J.D. Vance indeed succeeds Trump or leads a future administration, it will validate Thiel's grand bet – one that has been years in the making. And even if events take a different turn, Thiel's impact will be felt in the GOP for years: he has shown his fellow billionaires that **ideas, plus money, plus patience can fundamentally shift political direction**. In a very real sense, Peter Thiel has already won – he has midwived a movement that no longer sees liberal democracy as sacrosanct, and he has installed key acolytes to carry that torch forward. Whether this movement ultimately triumphs or burns out is a story still unfolding, but Thiel's pivotal role in it is now a matter of public record and historical consequence <sup>2</sup> <sup>65</sup>.

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These sources and others document Peter Thiel's evolution and outsized influence, painting a picture of a man who has consciously set about to **build a new political paradigm – one startup (and one politician) at a time.**

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