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Why Tech's Split With Trump Could Set the Country Back

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DEALBOOK

Alex Karp grew up in a liberal household and considers himself a progressive. He voted for Hillary Clinton, and he lives and works in Silicon Valley.

Yet Mr. Karp, the chief executive of Palantir, has found himself increasingly at odds with his peers in the technology industry as it publicly distances itself from the government, particularly the Department of Defense, under President Trump.

Mr. Karp readily admits he would prefer that Mr. Trump didn't occupy the Oval Office. But he believes that Silicon Valley — already facing something of a crisis of user confidence over issues including privacy and foreign influence — is setting itself up for a fall.

"It's going to be a very significant problem for the Valley," Mr. Karp, who rarely speaks publicly, said in an interview in his Manhattan office.

"I don't know how you stand up and talk to a Marine or a special operator and explain to them how you have a piece of software that will allow them to come home — or more likely allow them to come home — and you're not going to allow them to use it," he said. "I think it's a nearly impossible argument to make outside the Valley without people being legitimately pretty upset."

Employees at companies including Google, Microsoft and Amazon don't see it the same way. Google, under internal pressure, abandoned its contract with the Pentagon on Project Maven, which used artificial intelligence software to improve the analysis of imagery from drones. Microsoft's chief executive, Satya Nadella, has faced opposition from workers who want the company to end a contract with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. And Amazon employees have objected to providing facial recognition technology to police departments and other agencies.

All of this has set off a quiet — but growing — debate across corporate America in the age of Trump: What does it mean to be a patriotic company when you vehemently disagree with your nation's leader?



CHRISTOPHE PETIT TESSON/EPA, VIA SHUTTERSTOCK

Alex Karp, chief of Palantir Technologies, worries about tech's efforts to distance itself from the federal government.

Within the technology industry, the debate has been couched as a "moral and ethical" one: "We believe that Google should not be in the business of war," employees wrote in a petition that led to the company's withdrawal from Project Maven.

In truth, the ethical arguments are a diversion. This is political.

And there is a real danger in letting politics undermine the storied relationship between the government and Silicon Valley — Hewlett-Packard built sonar, radar and aviation equipment for the government during World War II, for example — that has led to much of the innovation we enjoy today.

Adam Grant, a professor at the Wharton School and a member of the Defense Innovation Board, an independent federal advisory committee set up under President Barack Obama, said he believed that the partisanship that was contributing to the debate would ultimately stifle innovation.

"I worry that it will stall progress," he said. "Innovation has been fueled for decades by private-public partnerships. It smacks of

cutting off your nose to spite your face. Even if you're not a fan of the president, you can still serve your country."

Mr. Karp, whose parents met at a civil rights demonstration, said he believed that American companies, including those in Silicon Valley, had a moral obligation to support the country and its military, no matter who was living at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

"We're proud that we're working with the U.S. government," he said.

Of course, Mr. Karp certainly has an interest in maintaining relationships between the government and the technology sector. Palantir, which uses technology to analyze vast troves of data, was founded with the help of \$2 million from the Central Intelligence Agency's venture capital arm, and much of its business model was to use data to help the government in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. But that makes his willingness to be so forthright about his view of the president refreshing when his peers who may have similar views stay quiet.

“I obviously am very biased,” he said. “I have a problem if I go to a cocktail party in Silicon Valley because they want to know, ‘Is it true that your product is used to target terrorists?’ Yes. And some people don’t agree with that. That’s fine, by the way. I don’t expect everyone to agree with that.”

His outspokenness is even more surprising given that a co-founder of Palantir is Peter Thiel, a serial entrepreneur who has publicly supported Mr. Trump.

“We didn’t vote for the same people,” Mr. Karp said without hesitation. “We’re not going to vote for the same people.”

Still, even if it is political allegiances that have prompted tech workers to push back, the ethical issues around artificial intelligence are not insignificant. Everyone from Elon Musk to Stephen Hawking has raised questions about technological warfare in the future. But we are still most likely decades away from those extreme kinds of worries being realized.

In fairness, the fears of some technology workers that their work will be used for ill do have a historical basis — in other countries. Ferdinand Porsche designed tanks for the Nazis, and Hugo Boss made their uniforms. Was that patriotism? Would it matter?

Reid Hoffman, who founded LinkedIn and sold it to Microsoft, where he now sits on the board, said there were real worries about how the government would use powerful technologies like artificial intelligence.

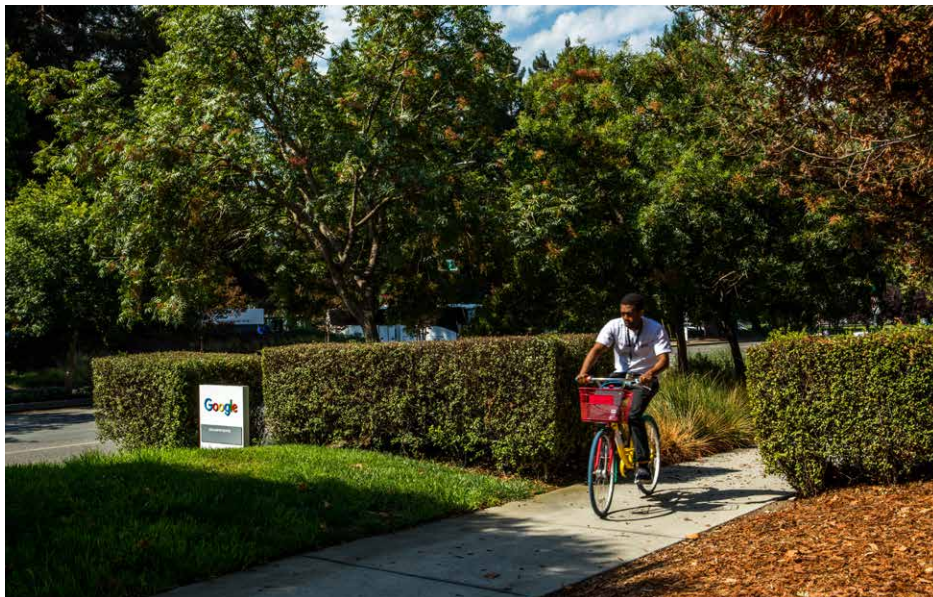
“I think that the majority of Silicon Valley people have a strong worry/reflex against weapons,” said Mr. Hoffman, who is a member of the Defense Innovation Board with Mr. Grant. The Trump administration, he said, has “amplified” concerns over “possible bad government action.”

But Mr. Karp said claims that a president could steer us toward an authoritarian world powered by artificial intelligence were too extreme.

“America is a complicated modern democracy with numerous checks and balances so that no one person has the ability to do insane things,” Mr. Karp said. With government work, he added, “you’re buying into the inherent fabric and structure of the country.”

Lost in the conversation in Silicon Valley is its own history. The internet itself was originally funded by an arm of the Defense Department that is now called the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. As recently as the Obama administration, Silicon Valley’s biggest technology giants embraced roles advising the government.

But there is a difference between today’s tech giants like Google and Facebook and those who turned the Santa Clara Valley into Silicon Valley. A bond with the government “was clearly not part of the founding



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIE HEMM KLOK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The Google campus in Mountain View, Calif. Employees successfully pressed Google to abandon an artificial-intelligence contract with the Pentagon in June.



Google abandoned a Pentagon contract in the face of internal opposition. Mr. Karp, who voted for Hillary Clinton, said that with government work, “you’re buying into the inherent fabric and structure of the country.”

of the consumer internet in any relevant way,” Mr. Karp said.

It is a connection that should be better understood by the employees now pushing for it to be severed. Those bright minds are able to have this debate in part because of the work done by their predecessors.

And given the very real questions that have emerged about the benefits — or lack thereof — that the biggest tech companies

truly offer society, those workers might want to rethink their position.

As Mr. Karp pointed out when we talked about the big technology companies, “If actually the narrative was ‘We are helping also with our defense,’ then people would understand the value of these other things” they do.

There could come a time when Silicon Valley wishes it was waving that flag.