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## OPINIONS

### I'm a tech CEO, and I don't think tech CEOs should be making policy

BY ALEX KARP

There are lively and necessary debates underway on many critical issues in the United States, but when a small group of executives at the largest Internet companies in Silicon Valley try to impose their moral framework on America, something has gone seriously and dangerously awry.

Companies and innovators in Silicon Valley have immense, almost monopolistic power. Many have lucrative contracts with the government. But under scrutiny from employees and activists, they are being pressured to avoid controversy by picking and choosing which contracts to accept and which to abandon. Giving in to this pressure will have the perverse effect of undermining the democratic principles that Silicon Valley leaders and activists pressuring them profess to support.

Let me be brutally clear about this: The young people who volunteer for the Marines and get deployed overseas might not agree with every mission, but you can be sure they are doing their jobs. Google earned millions of dollars working on Project Maven, an artificial-intelligence and machine-learning effort funded by the Defense Department with the potential to improve the military's drone accuracy and capabilities. Some of the company's workers objected — no problem there. But then Google executives backed away from the mission. The U.S. Marine serves; the Silicon Valley executives walk. This is wrong.

Palantir, the company I lead, was

founded after 9/11 with a commitment to helping those on the front line use data analytics to protect the United States while putting in place privacy protections others thought impossible to achieve. Since then, we have continued to innovate and expand our mission, helping multiple branches including Homeland Security Investigations. Part of our broader work for HSI has helped to combat genocide, crack down on sex trafficking, break up terrorist plots, defeat drug cartels and even protect the United States from malicious computer-hacking software, accomplishments that are rarely noticed by the outside world.

In contrast, the limited use of our platform by Immigration and Customs Enforcement has been widely reported and engulfed by the broader, often politicized immigration debate. Indeed, internally it has also been a topic of debate. Our company is full of complex thinkers. We have divergent views on every issue and certainly on issues related to immigration enforcement. I grew up the son of two civil rights activists and came of age in a progressive family and adopted many of the movement's values as my own. But immigration policy is not a software challenge; it's a political one. The solution lies with our political and judiciary system, not with Silicon Valley's C-suite.

I am deeply sympathetic to the people who are concerned about the use of software platforms in immigration policy. Every week or so, a small group of them holds a rally outside our office. What is worrisome is not their protests. What is worrisome is

that some Silicon Valley companies are taking the power to decide these issues away from elected officials and judges and giving it to themselves — a deeply unrepresentative group of executives living in an elite bubble in a corner of the country. They weigh their beliefs along with their complex business interests, both domestically and globally, and then make decisions that impact the safety and security of our country. This is not the way consequential policy decisions should be made. I don't believe I should have that authority.

No company should have to work for the government. The challenge is when they want to accept lucrative law enforcement or military contracts with one hand while stiff-arming the government with the other. Under those circumstances, a supposed moral stand is tainted by self-interest. And no leader should knowingly permit his or her products to be used illegally. That requires taking a stand. Indeed, there are immense regulatory and policy challenges we need to grapple with as a society, including how to manage the explosive growth of artificial intelligence and facial-recognition technology.

But let's reframe the controversy over immigration and look at it this way: If we want to preserve a democracy in which protests are part of our DNA, we need to make sure the decisions are made by elected representatives and judges, not by unelected engineers running global businesses in a precious corner of a Golden State.

The writer is chief executive of Palantir.