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## Libertarians' delusional "New Atlantis" fantasy: Floating ocean city-states

**A group lead by the grandson of economist Milton Friedman believes it can forge a better society on the high seas**

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Nearly 400 years ago, the English scientist, author and philosopher Francis Bacon wrote of a mysterious island nation in the Pacific Ocean, whose citizens used technology to solve hunger, cure sickness and control the weather. At the centre of this fictitious society existed a research [lab](#) known as Solomon's House, where elite scientists worked outside state control to achieve "the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire," Bacon wrote, and "the effecting of all things possible."

Since its 1627 publication, *The New Atlantis* has become one of the founding visions of our modern scientific age, instilling in Western thought Bacon's idea of technology as a means to improve the human condition. "To a great extent," claims a [journal](#) inspired by the book's legacy, "we live in the world Bacon imagined." Man of many legacies, Bacon played a lead role in Britain's colonization of North America, meaning in Canada and the U.S. we also live in the world he helped settle.

About six years ago, a group based in California's Bay Area, led by the grandson of U.S. economist Milton Friedman, began designing and raising money for a floating ocean city-state, whose citizens could harness the sea to solve hunger, cure sickness and fix climate change. "There's a rich history of people imagining a better society... on the ocean," the [Seasteading Institute's](#) Joe Quirk told me recently in San Francisco. "The difference now is that the technology to do this is at hand."

Whether that's true is a matter of debate — and one covered at length in more than 170 media [reports](#) on the Institute. What intrigued me more about Seasteading was its complete faith in technology to solve our planet's ills. "There's a split among people who care about the environment between people who want to go backwards and people who want to go forwards," Quirk said. "I don't think there's any going back to nature." Did that faith say something larger about our society?

### **'Blue civilization'**

Not long ago the Seasteading Institute posted eight [videos](#) narrated by Quirk on its website, offering oceanic solutions to world crises. Malnutrition? Harvest vast farms of nutritious sea-algae. Oil shortages? Turn a portion of the algae into biofuels. Climate change? Tap the ocean's clean thermal energy. Heart disease and diabetes? Allow medics to innovate on offshore labs. These and other "moral imperatives" can be fulfilled, Quirk narrated without irony, "by building floating cities on the sea."

I recently met Quirk in a cafe near San Francisco's Glen Park. He moved from New Jersey two decades ago, and became a best-selling [writer](#) of action novels and pop-science. Now he's writing a book on ocean societies. "I realized [seasteading] was an astonishing story," he said. A key tenet is that daunting crises like climate change can only be solved with ever more sophisticated technology — by "integrating nature into a blue civilization," he said, and "using the strengths of the sea."

Quirk's vision is audacious, but not necessarily far-fetched. Some biofuel firms see great promise in algae-based "Green Crude." And Lockheed Martin, for one, has [studied](#) ocean thermal energy since the 1970s. Nor are small floating cities so unrealistic: they might combine aspects of offshore oilrigs and cruise ships. So what's holding back our shift to a blue civilization? Seasteaders assign much of the blame to an ineffectual public sector. "Technology evolves," Quirk said. "Governments don't evolve."

That belief is shared worldwide. Or so suggests Edelman's 2014 Trust Barometer, which found global [trust](#) in the private sector to be 14 per cent higher than in the public sector, the largest such gap in the survey's history. "People see companies as a better place to rest their hopes than governments," Edelman cleantech vice-president Joey Marquart told me. Technology developers were the most trusted of all. "Tech gives this sense of the possible," he said, "this sense of inventing our way out of [crises]."

### **Libertarian roots**

For Seasteaders, those crises aren't just environmental. On a planet with seven billion people, but only 196 national governments, they believe we're in desperate need of fresh political ideas. The high seas for them represent a vast fluid laboratory, outside the control of land-based authorities, where experimental micro-nations can flourish. "We envision a future where... political pioneers are trying out their ideas in a sort of research and development department on the ocean," Quirk said.

Media outlets as diverse as Mother Jones, NPR, the Globe and Mail, BBC News, Fox Business and Reason Magazine have run [stories](#) on that vision. It's evidence, in Quirk's opinion, that the Seasteading meme has "captured the imaginations of people all across the political spectrum." Quirk, a self-described "political agnostic," argues a shared belief in technology's potential to fix world problems is what unites the Institute's own staff, who identify as "progressive, conservative, libertarian and confused."

Yet there's no confusion over Seasteading's ideological roots. Co-founder Patri Friedman is a strong believer — like his grandfather, Milton — in limited government and personal freedom. He thinks technology can achieve these libertarian ideals faster than democratic politics. "Technology alters incentives," he once [wrote](#) in the right-leaning Cato Institute's web journal, "which is a far more effective way to achieve widespread change than to attempt to fight human biases or change minds."

A growing number of libertarians see such potential in renewable energy. The son of 1964 presidential candidate (and conservative icon) Barry Goldwater is now leading an Arizona campaign to oppose centralized restrictions on rooftop solar panels, and equate "energy choice" with personal liberty. Similar efforts are underway in Hawaii and Georgia. They're flanks of an emerging global shift to decentralized energy that General Electric recently [estimated](#) could by 2020 be worth \$206 billion.

### **A new frontier**

For now, a floating city-state capable of producing its own energy, solving hunger, curing sickness and fixing climate change is no more real than the fictitious island society envisioned 500 years ago by Francis Bacon. Yet Seasteaders not long ago [crowdfunded](#) \$27,000 to pay for an aquatic design by Dutch firm DeltaSync. And matching funds came from a philanthropic foundation run by Paypal co-founder and early Facebook investor Peter Thiel, which has put over \$1.25 million into Seasteading.

Thiel also funds efforts to reverse aging and prepare for machines smarter than humans. He wants to [reclaim](#) the Jetsons-era zeitgeist of the 1950s and '60s, when human creation felt limitless. "The collapse of the idea of the future" for him began with the 1973 oil shocks. Since then we've faced one global crisis after another. Only by liberating our technological potential, Quirk thinks, can humankind overcome them. "We're not going to save humanity by making people live like they did hundreds of years ago," he said.

Hundreds of years ago, when Bacon was writing *The New Atlantis*, he also conceived of technology as a tool to achieve "the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire." Yet he hinted at some of the future dilemmas "that arise with the ability to remake and reconfigure the natural world," argues one [interpretation](#), such as the tension between unshackled innovation, and its potential to destroy us. What are crises like climate change, after all, but unintended consequences of our modern industrial epoch?

I thought of that tension later as I walked through San Francisco's Castro district and up onto the exposed Twin Peaks high above. Why were some people so fervently convinced, I wondered,

that the same explosion of technology imperiling future human existence would also save it? To the east I looked out over the Financial District, and towards the drought-ravaged Californian interior. But to the west I saw only the shimmering blue Pacific Ocean, and a cloudless horizon.

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