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PETER THIEL'S CONSERVATIVE VISION

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The last four speakers at the Republican National Convention were the candidate, the candidate's daughter, the candidate's friend of forty years, and the libertarian technologist and billionaire Peter Thiel. Yesterday, word came that Thiel would acknowledge in his speech that he is gay, and, although this is not news, his choice to say it in this arena, before a Party that has specifically singled out the L.G.B.T.Q. community for discrimination, made it a probe into the conservative psyche. "I am proud to be gay," Thiel said from the stage. "I am proud to be a Republican." The cheers were quick and loud, and a new inflection appeared in the Party's evolving politics of identity. Later, when the candidate himself pledged to defend L.G.B.T.Q. Americans, the Republicans in the arena stood to clap. "I have to say, as a Republican, it is so nice to hear you cheering for what I just said," Trump remarked, after the applause. "Thank you." I was standing amid the moderate Republican delegation from Washington, D.C., and each of its members—even the dead-enders who had been passing out #NeverTrump buttons a few minutes earlier—stood and cheered.

There was another form of conservatism at work in Thiel's prominence at this Convention, one that operates closer to the center of Trump's campaign: the belief that distinctions can and should be made between ordinary individuals and the extraordinary. Trump has no sense of policy and no interest in fact-finding or statistics. What he has offered to voters, as a rationale for his candidacy, is himself. "He actually has expressed a theory of governance that is more concrete than a lot of the others, which is that the basic function of the government is *deals*. And you need a president who can *do deals*," Michael Kinsley wrote recently.

But who would help him? Trump has promised to fill his government with the best businesspeople, though he has not named many names. The businesspeople he invited to speak at his Convention were generally appalling. There was Phil Ruffin, a casino mogul who declined to remove his sunglasses. There was Michelle Van Etten, a Florida multilevel marketer who claimed to employ more than a hundred thousand people, which is insane—that would be about six times the number of people who work for NASA, and no one has ever heard of Michelle Van Etten. Many conservatives are cautious about the idea of meritocracy; in his selection of speakers, Trump seemed to reject the idea of merit.

Enter Peter Thiel, who is both a theorist and an exemplar of Silicon Valley, in which business is a more visionary endeavor, in which talent is less social and more singular. Thiel—a co-founder of PayPal and an influential investor—established a scholarship, several years ago, offering a hundred thousand dollars to high-school graduates who imagine themselves talented enough to circumvent college and begin their lives as entrepreneurs. Thiel said that he wanted to liberate them from the “priestly class” of professors. Like other tech icons, such as Mark Zuckerberg and Bill Gates, Thiel has an intense, slightly awkward manner in public, which contributes atmospherically to the idea of his own singularity and difference.

Last night, Thiel walked onto the stage fast and leaning slightly forward, as though he had tipped out of a wheelbarrow; he has a nervous energy and a jack-o'-lantern face, a mouth you'd carve on a pumpkin. Thiel drew from Trump's narrative of American decline; his twist was to emphasize that, in at least one place in the country—greater Palo Alto—America already is great again. “Where I work, in Silicon Valley, it's hard to see where America has gone wrong. My industry has made a lot of progress, and it's made a lot of money,” Thiel said. “But Silicon Valley is a small place. Drive out to Sacramento, or even just across the bridge to Oakland, and you won't see the same prosperity. That's just how small it is.”

Thiel spent part of his childhood in Cleveland—that was one reason he was there—and his view was that, if government's heavy hand were lifted, other Silicon Valleys would sprout and genius obscured in other places would be liberated. “Opportunity was everywhere,” he said of Cleveland in 1968, when he arrived with his parents from Germany as a one-year-old. Back then, Thiel said, “The world's high-tech capital wasn't one city, because all of America was high-tech.”

In Thiel's view, inequality is both a natural consequence of a world in which ability is not distributed evenly and a problem that he would like to solve. In 2009, he wrote an essay for the journal of the libertarian Cato Institute in which he explained that he no longer believed “that freedom and democracy are compatible.” This is a dark idea; it also fits neatly with Trump's instinctive paternalism. Every regime, even an authoritarian one, needs a theory of talent. Thiel seemed to embody what Trump had in mind, earlier in his campaign, when he kept proposing to have a businessman like Carl Icahn solve the country's problems. Unlike the other businesspeople who spoke on Trump's behalf, Thiel does not seem like a crony kibbitzing around the pool. He seems like a genius.

There was a disoriented feeling in Cleveland around midnight, after the confetti and the balloons fell to the floor, as the delegates exited past an outdoor bar and a stage occupied by an R. & B. cover band. The Trump Administration is at once so near and so mysterious. There was some boozy talk from disaffected delegates that the Republican Party might be ending. If that seemed flip, it was sobering to remember that George W. Bush reportedly told a group of friends that he was worried he might have been the last Republican President.

One common assumption has been that a President Trump would allow what remains of the Republican Party to govern. Someone would need to be the Deputy Secretary of Transportation, and presumably Jeff Sessions or Chris Christie or Newt Gingrich would be eager to offer a recommendation. But the Party seems less stable now than it has in memory, and Trump—who this week proposed undermining NATO—appears disinclined to obey its orthodoxies. This week, Christie reportedly told a group of Republican donors that Trump wanted to let businessmen

serve the government part-time in positions of executive power. Would they be right-wing populists like Sessions, or libertarians like Thiel? The possibilities seem unbounded. The election is four months away.