

Nation of Change

NatCon kingmaker?

The most dangerous thing about rightwing populism or ‘National Conservatism’ is that the plutocrats that fund it and have become its standard bearers pretend that they have the interests of working people at heart.

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Most people know venture capitalist Peter Thiel as a co-founder of Paypal and early investor in Facebook, the latter company which he still holds a stake in despite criticizing the social network for ‘censoring’ conservatives. Others may have heard of him due to his funding of Hulk Hogan’s lawsuit against the web-site Gawker, which led to its dissolution.

While I was never a fan of Gawker’s click bait tabloid style journalism, Thiel’s funding of the suit seems to contradict his public stance on free speech issues, although in fairness this position may only apply to marginalized groups demands for a more civil discourse that takes their rights and identities into account.

Much more alarming, Thiel is also a co-founder of Palantir, a data analytics company that develops data mining software for everyone from police and intelligence agencies around the world to large corporations. A company with a \$20 billion valuation that received seed money from the CIA’s in house venture capital firm In-Q-Tel, Palantir allegedly worked with Cambridge Analytica, another such firm that achieved a level of infamy working for Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign, when it was accused of harvesting the data of millions of Facebook users.

While Palantir is extremely secretive, we do know that the company’s technology has been used to target the parents, family members and other sponsors of undocumented children in the United States resulting in hundreds of arrests before Immigration and Customs Enforcement realized that these detainees couldn’t be prosecuted using evidence obtained in this way and ended the program.

The use of Palantir’s tech by ICE offers another seeming contradiction of his professed libertarian philosophy, which has historically been pro-open borders, but it leads to an

understanding of something that's been happening on the right for some time: the rise of what its followers call 'National Conservatism'. This is just the more polite name for far right populism, an ideology that jettisons most of the good things from his previous ideology while preserving and expanding the cruelty and selfishness that has always been at its core.

National Conservatism as the name implies places nationalism at the center of its politics and fetishizes authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin and wannabes like Donald Trump.

Thiel himself made his early embrace of NatCon philosophy clear in 2009 in a piece published by the Cato Institute, writing, "Most importantly, I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible."

While he was an early supporter of Trumpism, the venture capitalist is smart enough to see that such an erratic personality might not be the best standard bearer for his ideology in the longer term, as Max Chafkin who wrote The Contrarian: Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley's Pursuit of Power explained to Politico in 2020, "...I think the strategy in 2020 was to kind of hedge—not to criticize Trump, but also not to be too closely associated with him. I think from Thiel's point of view, Trumpism—the sort of ideology behind Trump—is very good, and it's what Thiel believes in. And I think Thiel wants to find a way forward for that ideology, with or without Donald Trump. And I think his play right now is to be a major backer and a player in that world. Somebody who is going to shape the direction of that part of the electorate."

Thiel seems to have gone on to do just this, although how successfully still remains to be seen, with the first couple of real litmus tests of his Trumpism without Trump being two upcoming Republican Senate primaries in Arizona and Ohio.

The race being most closely followed in the press is the one in Ohio, which also has a more crowded field. Thiel's candidate is J.D. Vance, who worked for one of his firms, Mithril Capital, before going on to create his own, Vance has received a \$10 million donation from his old boss through a SuperPac called Protect Ohio Values.

Vance is probably better known to most as the author of "Hillbilly Elegy", a New York Times bestseller I can't comment on because it didn't interest me and I haven't read it. He may become even better known in the longer term for his gaffe filled campaign, with the author saying that the war in the Ukraine is less important to him than what's happening with migrants and asylum seekers on the U.S.' southern border, a self own when one considers the 80,000 Ukrainian Americans who call the state home and likely won't consider casting a vote for him.

In a move clearly meant to establish his credentials as an 'America First' Republican, earlier this week, Vance declared his support for Georgia Congressperson Marjorie Taylor Greene after she appeared at a white nationalist conference in February organized by Nick Fuentes, the tantrum prone child-like leader of the racist, misogynist 'Groyper' movement that grew out of what used to be somewhat self aware if inexcusable trolling online.

Concluding his defense of Greene, Vance advanced the claim that Republicans are subjected to "guilt by association" attacks while Democrats are not. Besides the fact that Representative Greene appeared before a crowd of proud neo-Nazis implying at least some support for their

‘movement’, the one sided guilt by association argument would surely come as a surprise to every Democrat ever accused of working with ‘Antifa’ or ‘communists’.

We will find out whether Vance can eke out a win in the primary after voting takes place on May 3rd.

The Arizona candidate, Blake Masters, has received less press scrutiny than already famous author Vance but is arguably even more beholden to Thiel, considering he’s still the chief operating officer of Thiel Capital, a position he has promised to resign from before his August primary. A SuperPac with the original name of Saving Arizona Pac that supports him has also received \$10 million from his employer.

On the issue of the 2020 election, Masters has staked out an interesting position that may work with Trump supporters, trying to walk a fine line by arguing in a video and an oped co-authored with Vance last October that while the election may not have been ‘fraudulent’ in the legal sense it was ‘unfair’ due to expanded mail in voting and the influence of Facebook in burying negative stories about Joe Biden.

According to polling by his own Pac, Masters is currently leading the race.

As noted by many of those commenting on these two Senate campaigns, both men are products of Ivy League colleges, Stanford for Masters and Yale and aim to present themselves as people who could easily have joined the American elite but rejected this course out of pure ‘patriotism’. They both also highlight their opposition to so-called ‘cancel culture’, raising the culture war above policy positions that might actually help the (white) working class they want as part of their populist base.

There is a tendency to believe in capitalist democracies that the wealthy attained their status because they are somehow better than other people, especially those who struggle financially, rather than people who started with advantages like rich family members who remove the roadblocks from their way, find a wealthy well connected mentor like Thiel or are just simply lucky.

To my mind, the most dangerous thing about rightwing populism or ‘National Conservatism’ is that the plutocrats that fund it and have become its standard bearers pretend that they have the interests of working people at heart.