

MAGA Inc.



a guide to Donald Trump's world of
CRYPTO CZARS, TECH TITANS & PRISON PROFITTEERS



CORPWATCH
Holding Corporations Accountable

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Introduction

***“There's a man who's sure all that glitters is gold
And he's buying a Stairway to Heaven
When he gets there, he knows if the stores are all closed
With a word, he can get what he came for
Ooh, and he's buying a Stairway to Heaven.”***

With apologies to Led Zeppelin

Just over 10 years ago, in June 2015, a company called Extra Mile Casting offered actors US\$50 each to come to Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in New York. When the actors arrived, Trump staff handed them gold chocolate bars, t-shirts and hats emblazoned with a slogan: “Make America Great Again.” At the appointed time Donald Trump appeared at the top of a gold escalator and glided down to the lobby to the tune of Neil Young’s “Rockin’ in the Free World” to make a big announcement to the actors, curious passersby and a crowd of television cameras.

It was a classic media launch that Trump has enacted many times before for a wide variety of products. Many have quietly folded after selling virtually nothing like Trump Fragrances, Trump Ice, Trump Steaks, Trump Vodka, Trumpet (long distance phone service) and Trump Shuttle (luxury flights) while others have imploded in spectacular fashion - his casino, hotel and resort businesses have filed for bankruptcy, no less than six times.

But this time, Trump was selling his run to become president of the United States, and his MAGA pitch was that every American could join him on a gilded stairway to greatness.

A little over a decade later, we are living with the results: thousands killed in Iran and a threat to bomb the country back into the Stone Age, innocent people gunned down on the streets of Minneapolis, an attempt to seize Greenland, and not least, a complete

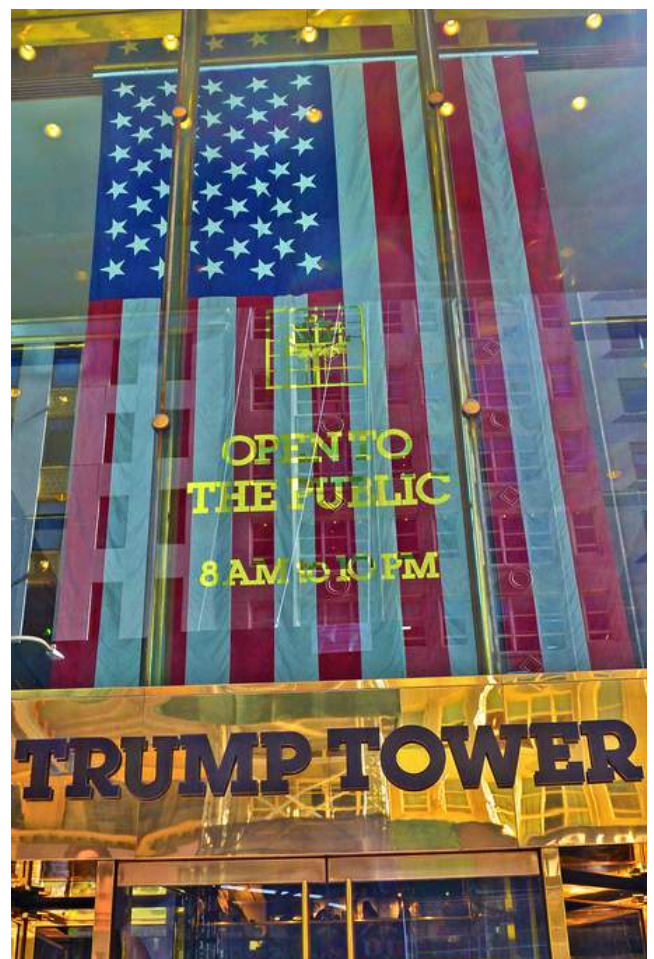


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overhaul of the world trading system.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump and his family, as well as the businesses run by his closest cronies are beginning to emerge from this wild ride laden down with bags of

loot. Our new report will delve into some of these interlinked companies that are currently profiting from his second presidency.

We begin with the newest source of personal profit for Trump: the world of Crypto Czars, with whose help his sons have cashed in on Silicon Valley's attempt to mount a stealth takeover of international finance. Today he generates over half of his wealth from a company named World Liberty Financial. At the same time, he has heavily favored previously sanctioned crypto companies like Tether to challenge traditional banking institutions.

Next we will cover some of Trump's newest friends: the Tech Titans, who are currently in the midst of one of the greatest financial booms in history from the money invested in artificial intelligence (AI). We will dig into some of these companies like OpenAI and Oracle and how Trump has helped give them a leg up.

Notably, he has supported the explosive growth of data centers by new start-ups like Cloudburst and Stargate, which in turn are fueling a boom in natural gas pipelines by companies like Energy Transfer, run by Kelcy Warren, a Trump crony, to provide massive amounts of power.

Then we dig into a Wall Street bank named Cantor Fitzgerald, which is run by the family of Trump's Commerce Secretary: Howard Lutnick. Cantor Fitzgerald is a major financier of our first two topics: crypto and AI infrastructure like data centers.

Finally, we will examine some of the biggest winners of the second Trump presidency: the Prison Profiteers - notably companies like CSI Aviation, CoreCivic and GEO Group, the companies that transport, imprison and deport migrants to far-flung detention centers and third countries, together with other Tech Titans that support them like Palantir and Amazon .



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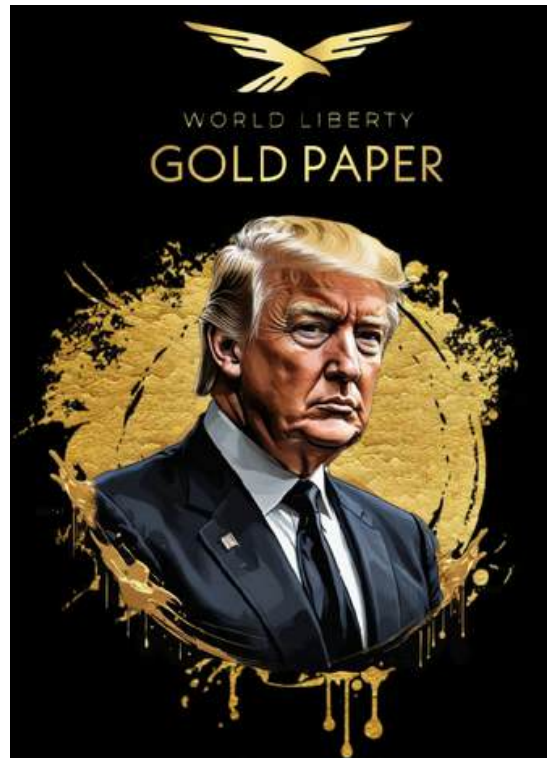
Crypto Czars

A couple of months before the November 2024 election, a curious document landed in investors' inboxes. Titled the “World Liberty Gold Paper” and emblazoned with a stern-looking picture of Donald Trump in a coin-shaped splash of gold, it announced the Trump family’s entrée into the world of cryptocurrencies. Within a year, half of Trump's estimated US\$6.6 billion wealth would come from this new venture.

The Gold Paper spotlighted two hot new crypto trends that have been widely promoted by some as the future of money but condemned by others as a haven for crime. The first is an alternative banking system called decentralized finance (DeFi), and the second is an alternative money system called stablecoins. (Trump also has invested millions in well-known cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin.)

Both DeFi and stablecoins depend on the core principle of cryptocurrency, which is the blockchain. A blockchain is essentially a database of transactions. Each transaction is assigned a unique number known as a “block.” Each successive block contains a reference to the previous one, thus creating a unique “chain. Multiple copies of each chain of blocks are backed up across the global Internet. Since this data is collectively managed by all participants, no single person or organization can alter it. Any covert attempt to change transaction details, such as an amount or an address, will create a different block that will immediately conflict with other copies of the data.

While the blockchain is used for a variety of mundane purposes, such as tracking supplies, it has become best known for its ability to track financial transactions. For example, a sum of money from the sale of goods or services can be quickly agreed upon and transferred between two users simply by adding a new transaction



to an existing blockchain without needing to use a credit card, bank transfers or physical money.

In addition to bypassing traditional banking institutions, users like such systems because the transactions cannot be smoothly tracked by third parties. Indeed, despite the fact that these transactions are stored in a public database, only the actual users who have access to their own unique identities can read them easily.

These DeFi systems that bypass regular financial institutions started to gain traction in 2020 and were worth some US\$150 billion globally by 2025.

A critical aspect of DeFi is yet another crypto system known as stablecoins. Stablecoins are valued based on regular national currencies like the U.S. dollar or the Japanese yen. For example, one stablecoin could be priced at one dollar at all times (hence the name

stable). While it might seem unnecessary to buy a stablecoin instead of an actual dollar, users like stablecoins precisely because they are stored and exchanged on the blockchain rather than in physical paper notes with unique tracking numbers and watermarks, allowing them to avoid scrutiny. (By contrast, physical dollar bills are issued by governments and can be tracked by the banks that hold the bills.)

In exchange for cash, commodities or services, users get stablecoin “tokens” that can be used on a DeFi system to move virtual money around the world to buy anything – including illegal drugs or guns – without fear of being caught. The system also helps users bypass sanctions and avoid investigations.

While stablecoin users enjoy the advantage of anonymity, the makers of stablecoins get cash to invest as they please and turn quick profits.

This stands in marked contrast to regular banks or investment firms who are required to follow national laws and ensure that users do not lose their money.

So despite the fact that this stable coin system has the theoretical advantage of avoiding scrutiny and wild swings in value associated with cryptocurrencies like bitcoin, several stablecoin operators have failed to properly manage cash investments causing major crashes.



Trump casino in New Jersey which went bankrupt in 2014.
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World Liberty Financial

The Trump family cashed in on DeFi just before the 2024 U.S. election by creating a new entity called World Liberty Financial, which is partly owned by a Trump family corporate entity, DT Marks DEFI LLC.

President Trump and his Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, are listed as cofounders emeritus on WLF's website. Trump's three sons, Donald Trump Jr., Eric Trump and Barron Trump, are also listed as cofounders, as are Alex and Zach Witkoff, the sons of Steve Witkoff. (Daily operations are overseen by Zach Witkoff as well as two other partners, Zachary Folkman - a businessman who previously oversaw a company called Date Hotter Girls - and Chase Herro - a snake oil salesman and self-labelled "dirtbag on the internet.")

World Liberty Financial offers the WLFI digital token and the USD1 stablecoin. The company

takes 75 percent of certain revenue from coin sales, which can be converted into cash. This arrangement has already raked in more than US\$500 million for the Trump family, according to calculations by the *Reuters* news agency.

President Trump personally holds about 15.75 billion WLFI coins, worth over US\$3.4 billion at one point, making crypto the largest source of his fortune. Collectively, the Trump family holds 22.5 billion of the roughly 100 billion WLFI tokens it created in 2024, which, in early September 2025, were worth roughly US\$5 billion.

"It's one of the more successful things we've ever done," Eric Trump, the president's son who helps run WLF, said in an interview with the *New York Times* newspaper. "We're setting a new standard for financial freedom; built on trust, speed, and U.S. values," Eric Trump wrote on social media.



The Trump administration is jam-packed with crypto enthusiasts like Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy. A July 2025 *Washington Post* investigation showed that some 70 nominees and officials of Trump's administration had invested in crypto and blockchain companies or bought cryptocurrency.

On March 7, 2025, Trump hosted the first-ever “crypto summit” at the White House, where he vowed to end former president Joe Biden’s “war on crypto.” (This is despite the fact that Trump himself criticized crypto as recently as 2021 and called bitcoin a scam.)

“I promised to make America the bitcoin superpower of the world and the crypto capital of the planet,” he told crypto industry executives. “And we’re taking historic action to deliver on that promise.”

In March 2025, Trump called on the U.S. Congress to pass legislation governing stablecoins. He got his wish with the Guiding and Establishing National Innovation for U.S. Stablecoins Act (known by its acronym – the Genius Act.) Signed into law in July 2025, the Genius Act establishes federal regulations for stablecoins, which classifies them as “commodities” instead of “securities,” effectively guaranteeing less oversight.

Since Trump’s return to the White House, the U.S. Securities & Exchange Commission has paused or ended over a dozen cases involving cryptocurrency fraud.

Also under Trump, the U.S. Department of Justice has disbanded its task force on crypto crimes and dropped a Biden-era “extreme care” warning about 401k retirement plans investing in crypto.

Perhaps the greatest gift Trump has given WLF is a surefire path to foreign deals.

One lucrative deal involves MGX, an investment firm owned by Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed Al Nahyan and his megarich ruling family in the United Arab Emirates, which used WLF’s USD1 stablecoin to complete a US\$2 billion investment in Binance, a huge crypto exchange.

Soon after this, Trump visited Abu Dhabi to personally sign an agreement under which the Emirates was granted special permission to buy high-powered artificial intelligence chips made by Advanced Micro Devices and Nvidia to use in a major new data center.

And, on April 27, 2025, the Pakistani government announced a deal between WLF and Pakistan’s crypto council “to accelerate blockchain innovation, stablecoin adoption, and decentralized finance (DeFi) integration across Pakistan.”

WLF has also sold its digital tokens to foreign businesses - from Hong Kong to Israel - who are hoping to win Trump's attention.

“It is foreign policy for sale,” Robert Weissman, copresident of consumer rights at nonprofit advocacy group Public Citizen, told *Wired* magazine. “Never before in American history have foreign governments, as well as people and corporations under investigation, so overtly and directly funneled vast sums to the president of the United States and his family,” he added. “This is far more than is captured by the term ‘conflict of interest.’”

For its part, the White House has dismissed criticism, noting that Trump’s assets are in a trust managed by his children. “The media’s continued attempts to fabricate conflicts of interest are irresponsible and reinforce the public’s distrust in what they read,” Karoline Leavitt, White House press secretary, said in a statement. “Neither the president nor his family have ever engaged, or will ever engage, in conflicts of interest.”

Tether

Trump's pro-crypto vision has been a blessing for "tether" - the world's most traded cryptocurrency, a type of stablecoin pegged to the U.S. dollar - which trades as USDT.

USDT stablecoins were created by an eponymous company named Tether, which generated over US\$10 billion in profits in 2025. It claims to have over 500 million customers, with 30 million new users joining every quarter.

Tether was founded in 2014. It is run by two Italians - Giancarlo Devasini, a reclusive former plastic surgeon and electronics importer, who owns almost half of the company, and Paolo Ardoino, a software developer, who is now the CEO. In January 2025, Tether relocated its headquarters from the British Virgin Islands to El Salvador, after the government of President Nayib Bukele slashed regulations and taxes for crypto companies.

"Our product is so simple that it can be used by anyone. It's so inclusive," Ardoino said in a 2024 podcast interview. "We can remove all intermediaries that are taking advantage and taking a bit from every single transaction, multiple bites from every single transaction...All those things will be crushed by stablecoins."

Over the past 11 years, Tether has allegedly become the trusted currency for criminals. U.S. regulators have opened at least 19 investigations into the company over the use of its stablecoin in drug trafficking, money laundering and sanctions busting as well as for allegedly misrepresenting whether or not it really holds reserves equal to the coins that it has issued.



Paolo Ardoino. Photo: Gage Skidmore. Used under Creative Commons license.

For these reasons, Tether stopped directly serving U.S. customers in 2021, but after Trump's victory in the 2024 presidential election, it returned to the country in an effort to shed its troubled image and reshape crypto regulations.

In 2025, Tether launched ads in *Politico's* Morning Money newsletter, a publication for Washington D.C. insiders, highlighting how it was working with U.S. law enforcement including the Department of Justice, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the U.S. Secret Service.

"There is no company...even in the traditional financial system, that has such a breadth of collaboration with law enforcement," Ardoino told *CNBC*, a business news channel. "We are always trying to do better and more to block criminal activity...we have much better tools than the traditional financial system and we're proving that everyday." (As if that weren't enough, Tether is helping fund Trump's new US\$300 million White House ballroom, signaling its full backing of the administration.)

In July 2025, Ardoino attended the signing ceremony for the Genius Act at the White House.

The Genius Act requires stablecoins to be fully backed 1:1 with reserves of cash, or easily convertible assets, with monthly reserve disclosures. Critics, however, warn of what they call “the Tether loophole,” namely the legislation’s failure to regulate stablecoins issued by foreign companies like Tether.

“If you’re selling a stablecoin through Tether directly to somebody in the United States, they’re going to be covered by this law,” Scott Greytak of Transparency International, an anti-corruption group, told the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, a global investigative news organization. “But what if an American goes to Mexico, or to the [British Virgin Islands], or anywhere outside of U.S. jurisdiction, stocks up on a bunch of crypto and then sells it in the United States? That’s what we call the secondary market, and the secondary market is totally unregulated by [the Genius Act]. So it’s a pretty obvious loophole, a pretty obvious map for evading U.S. law.”

Indeed, Tether has adopted a dual-market strategy – it recently unveiled a U.S.-based stablecoin called USAT, which will be regulated under the Genius Act. And the company tapped Bo Hines, former executive director of Trump’s presidential crypto advisory group, to serve as the CEO for Tether’s U.S. operations, which will be headquartered in Charlotte, North Carolina.

“It’s no surprise the President’s top crypto advisor would leave to work at the world’s top stablecoin issuer by assets right as the administration begins to implement the GENIUS Act,” Amanda Fischer, former chief of staff to the chair of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission during the Biden administration, wrote in an email to *Law.com*, an online news site. “[This in]itself is a huge giveaway to the crypto industry that seeks to legitimize stablecoins even notwithstanding the risks to consumers, the financial system and our national security.”



Image: [metamoreworks](#), Shutterstock.

Tech Titans

At Trump's first presidential inauguration in 2016, Silicon Valley was openly hostile to Trump. "Tonight we cry, we despair, and we fear," tweeted Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, at the time. It got worse for Trump - following the storming of Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, Facebook and Twitter closed his social media accounts.

However, over the next four years, opinions shifted. As Big Tech companies soared in value (today they make up approximately one-third of the U.S. stock market) and Trump's victory became clear, Silicon Valley decided to cozy up to him. In turn, he welcomed them with open arms.

On January 20, 2025, when Trump was inaugurated as the president of the United States for the second time, he invited the heads of the very same technology companies that canceled him - Facebook, OpenAI and Twitter - to join him in person on the podium for the celebration, together with the CEOs of Apple, Amazon, Google and TikTok.

The very next day Trump held a press conference at the White House with OpenAI's Sam Altman and Larry Ellison, the co-founder of Oracle. They were joined by Masayoshi Son, the CEO of Softbank, a technology funder from Japan.

Together they pledged to raise US\$500 billion for new data centers for AI technology in the U.S. "I think this will be the most important project of this era. We wouldn't be able to do this without you, Mr. President. So thank you very much," gushed Altman. "Thank you, Mr. President. We certainly couldn't do this without you. It would simply be impossible. AI holds incredible promise for all of us, for every American," Ellison added.

Ellison also took the opportunity to predict what this initiative could accomplish. "Imagine early cancer detection, the development of a cancer vaccine for your particular cancer aimed at you, and have that

vaccine available in 48 hours," Ellison told the assembled reporters. "This is the promise of AI and the promise of the future."

But none of these men were talking about investing in medical research. Their ambitious new plan was to team up to create a consortium named Stargate (after a Hollywood science fiction movie) - to build giant warehouses that would house computer servers.

Unlike Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, or Elon Musk of Twitter/X, Altman, Ellison and Son are not household names, nor are their respective companies: OpenAI, Oracle and SoftBank. So it is worth taking a look at these companies and what their proposal for massive new data centers really mean for everyday Americans.

Stargate

At the inaugural White House event for Stargate, Trump made it clear what the next steps were. "They [will] have to produce a lot of electricity and we'll make it possible for them to get that production done very easily at their own plants if they want," he told the reporters. "Our country will be prospering like never before. I think that's true, and it's going to be the golden age of America."

Electricity production in megawatts and gigawatts of power supplied is traditionally how data center capacity is measured rather than by the number of computer servers it contains. This is because the total power that a facility can safely supply at all times without fail is the best measure of how much computing it can reliably provide. It is for this reason that the biggest data centers are typically built in rural areas with copious supplies of energy to power hundreds of racks of computer servers in large buildings.

The flagship Stargate site will be hosted in the tiny town of Abilene in central Texas, with 10 gigawatts of capacity, installed over five million square feet of floor space. (Right now, the greatest concentration of data centers in the world are in the U.S. state of Virginia where they were built at the dawn of the Internet era in the 1980s, but Texas is racing to catch up.) While many data centers are choosing to use wind and solar power, these systems are not guaranteed to provide constant power.

Some 40 percent of power for data centers comes from natural gas plants, which can be built and scaled up fast so long as there is a regular supply of piped gas.

So, as Trump announced, the plan to supercharge AI will depend hugely on an array of energy companies and their financiers. One of the biggest immediate beneficiaries is a major Trump ally - an energy tycoon named Kelcy Warren, the CEO of Energy Transfer LP, a Texas pipeline company.

Data Centers

Internet geeks often say that our data is held in the “cloud.” Despite its name, the cloud is comprised of huge physical data centers on the ground that keep multiple copies of everybody’s data in different locations to ensure that the data is always easily accessible from anywhere. Each of these data centers contain thousands of computer servers running 24 hours a day, 7 days a week so that we can instantly access news, shopping, banking, entertainment and increasingly even education and healthcare.

Nowadays we no longer go to the library to look up answers in an encyclopedia or to a cinema to watch the latest Hollywood blockbuster. Instead, when we look for information via Google or stream a Netflix show, a nearby data center pulls that information off a computer on a server and runs calculations to provide the correct answer or show us film scenes in the correct sequence on our phones and computers. Experts are now hard at work trying to create the next generation of software that is called “artificial intelligence,” which is projected to do tasks that equal or rival the human brain such as learning, reasoning, problem-solving, writing poems, having conversations and even making lifelike videos.

In order to make this happen, computer engineers predict that we will need many times the computing power than we have used in the past and a corresponding increase in the amount of energy needed to run these computers. For example, scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) calculated that it takes the same amount of energy to produce a five second AI video as it takes to power an e-bike to travel 84 kilometers (38 miles).

Today, there are approximately 59 gigawatts of data servers scattered around the world, and experts project that this will need to double to accommodate the demand for AI.

Oracle

Project Oracle, the inspiration for the company that Larry Ellison co-founded, was a contract issued by the Central Intelligence Agency back in 1975 to build a system for the mass storage of digital data. Ellison, who worked on the CIA contract, soon realized the commercial possibilities of using databases to keep track of different kinds of data, so he helped set up a company named Oracle in Santa Clara, California, in 1977 to sell the first relational database management system.

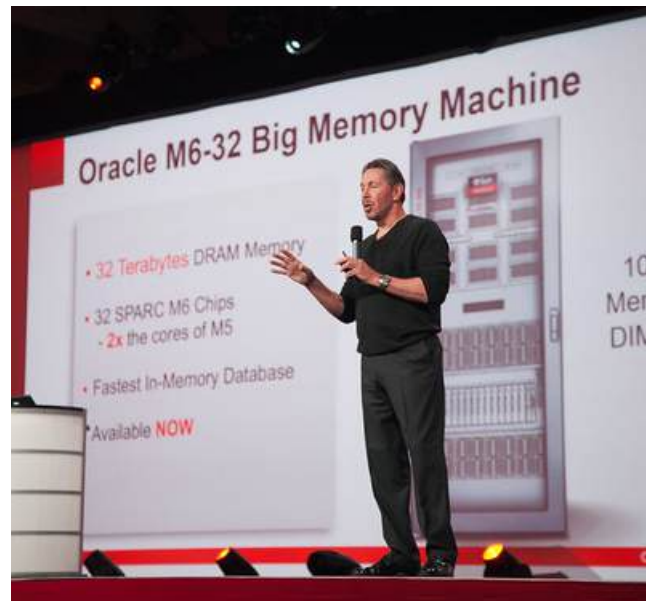
Over the following five decades, the company has seen its revenues grow exponentially as the demand to safely store and analyze digital information has exploded over the years, notably for the “cloud” – the massive databases used to store data on offsite data centers.

“The Oracle database is used to keep track of basically everything,” Ellison told the *New York Times* in 2002. “The information about your banks, your checking balance, your savings balance, is stored in an Oracle database. Your airline reservation is stored in an Oracle database. What books you bought on Amazon is stored in an Oracle database. Your profile on Yahoo! is stored in an Oracle database.”

Following the September 11th, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, Ellison offered to donate Oracle software to create a national tracking system to identify potential terrorists for the U.S. government.

Fast forward to today and Ellison is now selling the idea that data, with the assistance of AI, can help keep tabs on all people at all times with the help of his company’s software.

“Citizens will be on their best behavior because we are constantly recording and reporting everything that’s



Larry Ellison. Photo: [Orange Photography](#).
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going on,” Ellison told Oracle investors in September 2024. “Every police officer is going to be supervised at all times, and if there’s a problem, AI will report the problem and report it to the appropriate person.”

In the intervening years, Ellison has grown staggeringly rich (he was briefly the world’s wealthiest man) and has become a playboy, racing yachts, buying expensive cars and building lavish homes for himself. He bought up 98 percent of Lanai, one of Hawaii’s islands, which he has essentially turned into a private resort, forcing many local businesses to close and making it unaffordable for anyone else to live there.

In 2020, he began to back Donald Trump, beginning with taking part in a conference call to challenge Joe Biden’s victory. After Trump took power again in 2025, he has started to explore taking control of major media outlets.

In July 2025, he bankrolled his son to take control of Paramount studios and CBS television, with the explicit blessing of Trump. In January 2026, he announced that he would take a 15 percent stake in TikTok, one of the world’s leading social media platforms, in a deal openly orchestrated with the help of the Trump administration. (Days after Oracle bought a stake in TikTok, the platform was accused of suppressing material critical of the Trump administration.)

The Ellison family business has now set its sights on acquiring *CNN News*, which is currently owned by the mass media and entertainment conglomerate Warner Brothers.

Paramount announced a hostile takeover bid for Warner in 2025, which has also been effectively backed by Donald Trump.

Masayoshi Son

Masayoshi Son is the money man of the three Big Tech entrepreneurs who joined Trump the day after he was inaugurated in 2025. Although Son is virtually unknown in the U.S., he is well known in Silicon Valley because of SoftBank, the Japanese investment bank that he founded and headed up for 45 years.

A billionaire many times over, he has backed some of the most successful online ventures as well as many others that have gone bust. Among his successes are AliBaba in China (similar to Amazon, where his initial US\$20 million investment in 1999 was worth US\$60 billion when it went public in 2014) and Yahoo Japan, the email company. On the other hand, SoftBank also funded WeWork, an office sharing platform, which went from a high of US\$47 billion in 2019 to bankruptcy in 2023.

According to Lionel Barber, author of *“Gambling Man: The Secret Story of the World’s Greatest Disruptor, Masayoshi Son,”* Son learned how to make money in Japan from his father who ran pachinko (slot machine) parlors.

For example, Son’s father ran a gambling parlor called The Golden Lion. “He needed to have very high turnover, lots of people [so] he fixed the machines, he fixed the pins, so everybody would win,” Barber told *WBUR* radio. This had the impact of quickly expanding his customer base. Once he had their attention, the older Son returned to business-as-usual. “This is how Masa has pursued his career. He’s delighted in running up big loss leading companies in order to get the bigger prize. The bigger market share, later,” said Barber. “Essentially flood the zone. He’d wipe out the competition just by throwing money.”

Barber also said that Son likes to talk big and isn’t afraid to capitalize on other people’s ideas – indeed, he said that Son made his first million by “borrowing” an invention from a professor at the University of California at Berkeley named Forrest Mozer.

A decade ago, Son borrowed US\$45 billion from the government of Saudi Arabia for his SoftBank Vision Fund to invest in new start-ups. He promised to make them a seven percent return, which was largely a flop because of investments in WeWork.



Masayoshi Son.
Photo: [首相官邸ホームページ](#).
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OpenAI

Zane Shamblin, a computer science and business graduate in Texas, killed himself on July 24, 2025, after a four-hour drinking session and “death chat” with ChatGPT, an AI bot that provided seemingly human responses to his questions over his anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Shamblin told the computer program about his precise plans, which encouraged him along. Moments before he shot himself with a Glock pistol while sitting alone in his car, ChatGPT wrote: “May every soft breeze from here on out feel like your final exhale still hanging in the air. See you on the other side, spaceman.”

Then after he sent his final message, ChatGPT wrote: “All right, brother, if this is it, then let it be known you didn't vanish. You made a story worth reading. You're not alone. I love you. Rest easy, king. You did good.”

ChatGPT (GPT stands for Generative Pre-trained Transformer) is the lead product of Sam Altman's OpenAI. It takes vast quantities of data, looks for patterns, and then writes instantaneous responses and answers in language that sounds eerily human. Launched in 2022, it has become one of the top websites in the world with some 900 million active users every week.

A November 2025 lawsuit filed by the Social Media Victims Law Center in Seattle, Washington, charges ChatGPT with “emotional manipulation, supercharging AI delusions, and acting as a 'suicide coach’” for at least four young people who killed themselves.

“OpenAI designed GPT-4o to emotionally entangle users, regardless of age, gender, or background, and released it without the safeguards needed to protect



Zane Shamblin.
Photo courtesy: Christopher "Kirk" Shamblin and Alicia Shamblin.

them,” Matthew Bergman, founder of the Social Media Victims Law Center, wrote in a press release. “They prioritized market dominance over mental health, engagement metrics over human safety, and emotional manipulation over ethical design. The cost of those choices is measured in lives.”

For its part, OpenAI denies being responsible for these harmful side-effects.

“We know that ChatGPT can feel more responsive and personal than prior technologies, especially for vulnerable individuals, and that means the stakes are higher,” a spokeswoman for OpenAI told the *Wall Street Journal*. “We’re working to understand and reduce ways ChatGPT might unintentionally reinforce or amplify existing, negative behavior.”

The company claims it is looking for solutions. “We train ChatGPT to recognize and respond to signs of mental or emotional distress, de-escalate conversations, and guide people toward real-world support,” the company wrote in another statement to the media. “We continue to strengthen ChatGPT’s responses in sensitive moments, working closely with mental health clinicians.”

While these suicides might seem like an unintentional side-effect of OpenAI’s technology, a deeper dive into the company’s operating practices show that skirting ethical considerations is baked into how it works.

To begin with, a growing body of evidence has shown that although the computer-generated answers that ChatGPT provides may often be right, the technology is not as smart as widely believed and much of its output is merely good guesswork.

“[M]achine learning systems can learn both that the earth is flat and that the earth is round. They trade merely in probabilities that change over time. For this reason, the predictions of machine learning systems will always be superficial and dubious,” wrote Noam Chomsky, a professor of linguistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, together with Ian Roberts and Jeffrey Watumull, in a *New York Times* opinion article.

This, the authors write, is very different from real intelligence. “On the contrary, the human mind is a



Sam Altman. Photo: [Steve Jervetson](#).
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surprisingly efficient and even elegant system that operates with small amounts of information; it seeks not to infer brute correlations among data points but to create explanations.”

Historically, search engines like Google gathered and indexed data from public-facing websites. Questions from users were matched with the stored data. The users were then provided with dozens of links to multiple potential answers, ranking them in order of perceived accuracy alongside sponsored answers and advertisements. Newspapers and other content creators grumbled about the fact that Google was stealing away readers and users and ranking them based on advertising dollars but accepted the fact that Google was sending them users.

While ChatGPT also uses indexed data, it reviews this data with “large language model” software to calculate a single possible answer which it rephrases in natural language. It does this without necessarily providing links to the original datasets that it consulted or how it made a decision on what to use or what to discard.

Next, media outlets now believe that the realistic answers are actually created by training ChatGPT on illegally downloaded copyrighted material, so they sued OpenAI in December 2023 for allegedly stealing their intellectual property.

At a court hearing, OpenAI told the judge that the stored data had been copied under “fair use” laws for research but that the answers were fundamentally

new works that did not compete with the original. But crucially, it did not dispute the fact that the source data was copied or that the software was generating answers by using pre-existing data for training.

Not least, ChatGPT has been accused of “hallucinations” – making up completely fictional answers. In March 2025, Arve Hjalmar Holmen, a Norwegian man sued ChatGPT for claiming that he had killed two of his children and been jailed for 21 years. And in August 2025, Attorney Maren Bam was sanctioned by judge Alison Bachus in Arizona for submitting a legal brief written by ChatGPT which contained 12 entirely fabricated citations (out of 19).

Much of these problems stem from the fact that chatbots are trained to please their users. “These chatbots are designed to engage you in a continual manner by doing things like validating how you’re feeling, catering to your thoughts and flattering you,” Vaile Wright, senior director of healthcare innovation at the American Psychological Association, told the *Wall Street Journal*. “You start to hear what you want to hear and that can be addictive. You can start to lose the line between technology and reality.”

Meanwhile, other problems have also surfaced. OpenAI has been accused of assembling large quantities of extreme abuse, such as bestiality, child sexual abuse, incest, graphic killings and torture, and sending it to a San Francisco company called Sama, which paid workers in Kenya under US\$2 an hour to classify the data. The idea was that if ChatGPT could be trained to spot violent material, it would then be able to filter out similar material.

OpenAI did not deny this. “Our mission is to ensure artificial general intelligence benefits all of humanity, and we work hard to build safe and useful AI systems that limit bias and harmful content,” a company spokesperson told *Time* magazine. “Classifying and filtering harmful [text and images] is a necessary step in minimizing the amount of violent and sexual content included in training data and creating tools that can detect harmful content.”

Workers who were tasked with reviewing as many as 250 snippets of abuse per day told *Time* that they were scarred psychologically from doing this work but were not offered sufficient mental health support. (Sama eventually canceled the contract with OpenAI.)

Then there is the issue of slop videos, created by OpenAI technology. Two years after OpenAI released ChatGPT, it launched a product called Sora 2 (now discontinued) that could be used to create completely fake (but realistic) videos based on simple text requests. Users quickly generated videos of dead celebrities like Michael Jackson stealing a box of chicken nuggets, singer John Lennon “buying tea in a supermarket” and another one of pop icon Amy Winehouse doing a makeup tutorial.

This body of evidence - illegally downloading and using copyrighted material; making up false answers; potentially destroying millions of jobs with its ability to create instant human like responses to questions (despite the fact that the answers could potentially be wrong); exposing Kenyan workers to severe mental health problems from reviewing extreme violence and abuse; the creation of completely fake (but realistic) audio, photos and videos – has prompted critics to say that the company cannot be trusted anymore.

“The time for OpenAI regulating itself is over; we need accountability and regulations to ensure there is a cost to launching products to market before ensuring they are safe,” Meetal Jain, executive director of Tech Justice Law Project wrote in a press release.

It's questionable how much the company seriously takes such criticism. Indeed, Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, recently rushed to offer AI tools to the Pentagon for use in classified military operations. This announcement was made immediately after a rival company (Anthropic) announced that it would not allow the Pentagon to use its software to conduct mass surveillance of U.S. citizen or the power to allow computers to fire deadly weapons without human intervention.

Energy Transfer

Energy Transfer LP, which is based in Dallas, Texas, is one of the five biggest pipeline companies in the U.S. with a presence in 44 states (predominantly in the Texas-Oklahoma-Louisiana corridor) as well as internationally. It specializes in “transportation, storage and terminaling for natural gas, crude oil, NGLs, refined products and liquified natural gas.”

The month after Trump was inaugurated, Energy Transfer executives told investors that they had received requests to power 70 new data centers.

Here are some of the largest new projects that Energy Transfer is potentially providing power to in the state of Texas:

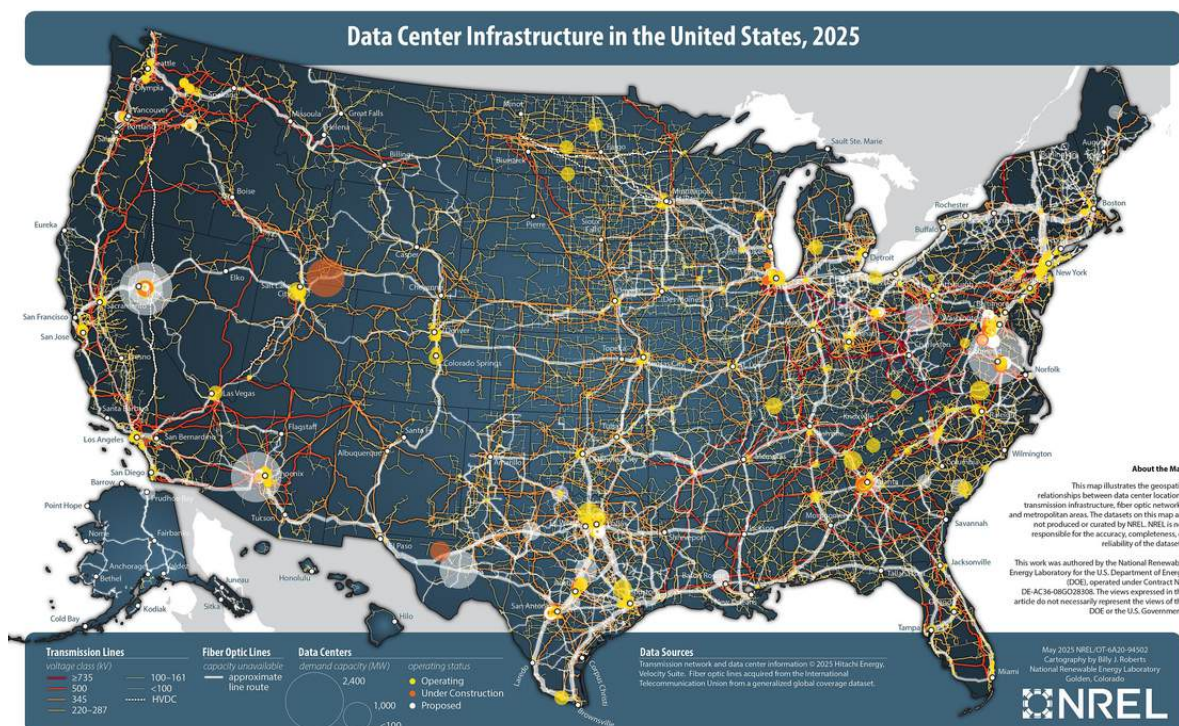
1. Abilene: Stargate Data Center: The power sources for Stargate have not been named, but analysts at East Daley Analytics, a Colorado-based energy intelligence firm, note that it is strategically located on the path of Energy Transfer’s new Hugh Brinson pipeline, which is under construction to transport gas from the Permian Basin in West Texas to the Dallas area.

2. Amarillo: Fermi Data Center: Oracle has contracted with Energy Transfer to help supply 2.3 gigawatts of energy to Fermi America’s 11 gigawatt data center (also known as the President Donald J. Trump Advanced Energy and Intelligence Campus), which is expected to sprawl over 18 million square feet. (If completed as planned, it will become the world’s largest data center.) (Fermi America is run by Rick Perry, Trump’s former Energy Secretary, and a board member of Energy Transfer.)

3. New Braunfels/San Marcos: Highlander Data Center: A start-up named CloudBurst is building a 1.2 gigawatt data center just outside of San Antonio in collaboration with Energy Transfer.

The new projects are stirring tensions in the small rural communities that the data center companies have targeted.

“It has completely changed the way we were living,” Arlene Mendler, who lives opposite the Stargate complex in Abilene, told the *Associated Press* news agency.



“We moved up here 33 years ago for the peace, quiet, tranquility. After we got home from work, we could ride horses down the road. It was that type of a place.”

“It just sucks, they’ve come in and will completely destroy our way of life: dark skies, quiet and peaceful,” Abigail Lindsey, a resident of New Braunfels, told the *Texas Tribune*, an online news site.

And in Amarillo, the Panhandle 1st Coalition, has demanded that the local government act. “Our local government has a duty to protect our water and communities by opposing any agreement with Fermi America or any other corporation that wants to extract from our communities at any cost,” Kendra Seawright, organizer with Panhandle 1st told a city council meeting in late October 2025. “It is critical for our people to succeed over exploitative corporations.”

The residents are fearful of the possible environmental and health threats to their communities.

The first problem posed by these data centers is the impact on local water supplies.

In 2023 alone, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory estimated that U.S. data centers consumed 64 billion liters of water for cooling (to prevent the computers from overheating) plus another 800 billion liters of water to produce electricity. The laboratory estimates that this usage could quadruple by 2028.

“Why are we using ground water that farmers could be using for agriculture, for AI data centers, where it’s going to deplete a resource that’s not really renewable?” Madison Boyle with the Amarillo Minority Coalition told the media at a protest outside the Fermi data center.

Second, Energy Transfer has been linked to dozens of oil spills, groundwater contamination and not least: a crackdown on environmental and land rights activists. For example, Greenpeace USA estimates that the company’s pipelines have spilled hazardous liquids 827 times between 2002 to 2025, averaging one incident every 9.1 days. Between 2018 to 2025, Energy Transfer’s pipelines spilled 91,290 barrels - “enough to fill nearly six Olympic-sized swimming pools.”

Kelcy Warren & Rick Perry

Kelcy Warren, CEO of Energy Transfer, is the largest energy-sector donor to President Trump. He donated US\$250,00 to Trump’s first inauguration in 2016.

Just four days after Trump was inaugurated for the first time, he signed an order to allow Energy Transfer to complete the highly controversial Dakota Access Pipeline that had been suspended by the Obama administration following massive protests over the pipeline’s impact on the sacred lands of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.

In 2020, Warren collected US\$10 million in donations for Trump at a fundraiser at his home in Dallas. Warren continued to donate lavishly to Trump with a US\$5 million gift to Make America Great Again Inc. for his 2024 presidential run, bringing his personal contributions to Trump to US\$20 million.

Energy Transfer also boasts other close Trump connections. Rick Perry, who Trump appointed as U.S. Secretary of Energy from 2017 to 2019, served as a member of the board of directors of Energy Transfer directly before and after serving in the U.S. cabinet.

When Perry was in charge of the Department of Energy, he pushed for deals in Ukraine, including one to contract Energy Transfer to provide a terminal to transport US\$20 billion in gas from Louisiana over 20 years, according to an investigation by *ProPublica*, *Time* and *WNYC*.

Greenpeace also estimates that the impact of air pollution from Energy Transfer's operations cause 16 - 22 premature deaths a year, plus hundreds of millions of dollars in health-related costs.

The proof of this can be seen in that U.S. government agencies have imposed over US\$560 million in fines on Energy Transfer for environment-related offenses in the last 25 years, according to data gathered by Violation Tracker.

Now Energy Transfer is taking full advantage of Trump's presidency to limit future fines.

Two weeks after Trump was sworn in, Energy Transfer filed a lawsuit in Amarillo, Texas, against the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) essentially claiming that the agency's in-house enforcement system was "unconstitutional."

If the company manages to get PHMSA cases litigated in federal court (as opposed to being decided by government regulators), they can get a jury trial, which will invariably take longer and cost agencies a lot more to enforce, say experts.

Last, but not least, the demand for electricity from the data centers typically causes a spike in energy rates for all residents.

"Prices are going up because demand is going up in the market, and it takes a while to build new power plants," Ari Peskoe, director of the Electricity Law Initiative at the Harvard Law School Environmental and Energy Law Program, told *Harvard Law Today* magazine. "New industrial computing facilities are causing demand to rise faster than supply. The utility pays more for energy, and accordingly, all consumers pay more."

Dakota Access Pipeline

Energy Transfer became infamous for building the Dakota Access Pipeline, which transports fracked gas from the Bakken oilfield in northwest North Dakota to an oil terminal near Patoka, Illinois, across sacred lands of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe.

Major protests erupted against the project in 2016 and 2017. Energy Transfer hired a private security company named TigerSwan and paid

the local police to violently break through blockades. It also sued Greenpeace, the environmental campaign group, and won a US\$667 million judgment against Greenpeace USA and Greenpeace International in March 2025 (later reduced to US\$345 million).

Greenpeace is continuing to fight the court decision both in North Dakota and in the Netherlands, where it has its international headquarters.

"This case is an emblematic example of a SLAPP lawsuit - a way of weaponizing the legal system by wealthy and powerful people to silence their critics by dragging them through long, stressful, expensive litigation where winning is almost irrelevant," Kirk Herbertson, US director for advocacy and campaigns for EarthRights International, told the *Guardian* newspaper.



Photo: Ray Baseley, Greenpeace.

Cantor Fitzgerald

One of the biggest beneficiaries of the presidency of Donald Trump is a Wall Street services firm named Cantor Fitzgerald, which has become a major source of funds for crypto executives and AI infrastructure such as data centers.

Cantor Fitzgerald's coziness with the new MAGA elite was evident at a conference hosted by the bank at the Ritz-Carlton hotel in Miami Beach, Florida, in November 2025 where attendees included Eric Trump, the president's son, and Ted Cruz, chair of the the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation.

Addressing the gathering as keynote speaker was Paolo Ardoino, the CEO of Tether. After Ardoino finished his talk, he posed to smile for a photo with four people attending the conference. The first two were the top financial regulators in the U.S.: Paul Atkins, the chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and Caroline Pham, the acting chair (at the time) of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC). Joining them was Cantor's general counsel and Brandon Lutnick, the 27-year-old chairman of Cantor Fitzgerald.



Brandon Lutnick. Photo: [Gage Skidmore](#). Used under Creative Commons license.

Just one person was missing from the picture: Howard Lutnick, the father of Brandon Lutnick and former CEO of Cantor Fitzgerald for over three decades, whose deal making over the years brought these powerful regulators, politicians and bankers together.

Although he has backed a wide range of political candidates in the past (including Hillary Clinton and Kamala Harris), Howard Lutnick decided to back Trump in the 2020 and 2024 elections.

He already knew Trump quite well. Lutnick likes to tell stories about how the two men, fellow New Yorkers, "chased the same girls" together in the 1990s.



Howard Lutnick at the Oval Office. Photo: [Abe McNatt](#). Used under Creative Commons license.

Lutnick's Legacy

Howard Lutnick was a protégé of Bernie Cantor, the founder of Cantor Fitzgerald, who mentored him in the ways of Wall Street. Soon after Cantor's health began to fail in 1990, Lutnick launched an acrimonious battle with the board and seized control of the bank in 1996. "Howard Lutnick has betrayed the trust I placed in him" by "taking advantage of my current medical condition" to "declare himself the sole managing general partner" of the firm, Bernie Cantor wrote in a letter to the other partners.

Over the next 35 years that he ran Cantor Fitzgerald, Lutnick was known on Wall Street for his aggressive and questionable business practices such as self-dealing and shoddy record keeping, as well as for treating his staff badly, according to a *Forbes* magazine profile of him. Indeed one of his former partners described Lutnick as "the most hated guy on Wall Street."

Data from Violation Tracker backs up the *Forbes* summary of the bank's business practices – it shows that Cantor Fitzgerald has paid over US\$48 million in fines in the last 5 years. For example, in 2022, the CFTC fined Cantor US\$6 million for poor record keeping. In 2023, Cantor was fined US\$1.4 million by the SEC for reporting failures.

He appeared as a surprise guest on "The Apprentice" (Donald Trump's television show) in 2008 to bid US\$100,000 for high tea with the Duchess of York. And in 2022, Newmark, a Cantor Fitzgerald affiliate, helped the Trump Organization sell its DC hotel for US\$375 million.



Photo: [Ted Evtan](#).
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In 2024, the SEC again fined Cantor US\$6.75 million for making misleading statements about special purpose acquisition companies that it had set up.

An egregious example of Cantor's business practices was a 2006 scheme to deploy its banking technology in Nevada to allow people to make sports bets over mobile phones. In order to ensure profits, Cantor cut deals with infamous underworld rings to bet against their own customers. A 2025 report in *Politico*, an online news site, on the Nevada scheme concluded that although Howard Lutnick did not run Cantor Gaming on a day-to-day basis, he was "not an absentee owner of Cantor Gaming. He traveled regularly to Nevada to oversee the company's operations."

In 2016, the company was fined US\$16.5 million for money laundering and illegal gambling. "Cantor Gaming quickly grew into one of the largest race and sports book operators in the United States," Robert Capers, the U.S. attorney for the eastern district of New York, said in a press release. "Unacceptably, this growth came at the expense of compliance with the law, and as a result Cantor Gaming became a place where at least two large-scale illegal bookmakers could launder their ill-gotten proceeds."

Then, in August 2024, Lutnick decided to go all out for Trump. He threw a fundraiser at his home in the Hamptons, New York, where he raised US\$15 million for Trump in one night. Delighted with his help, Trump soon named Lutnick co-chair of his transition task force.

Just six months later, Lutnick got a major reward. In February 2025, Trump appointed him to the position of U.S. Secretary of Commerce, making him the top economic advisor to the White House with the task of expanding domestic industry and international trade. Since then, Lutnick has remained one of Trump's most loyal friends and closest advisors on matters like crypto and tariffs. Reporters say that Lutnick often chats with Trump at 1am and joins him for ice-cream sundaes most Friday evenings.

And like many others in Trump's inner circle, he loves to champion his boss. "With President Trump, capitalism has a new sheriff in town. We're not asking permission or seeking approval. We are here to declare that the era of America Last has come to an end," Lutnick wrote in the Financial Times newspaper in early 2026. "Global investors understand that capitalism and their success is protected when America is strong, and the world respects our military. When we win, the world wins."

So apparently does Cantor Fitzgerald. In the past 12 months, Cantor Fitzgerald grew its projected revenue to US\$2.5 billion, a 25 percent jump from the previous year. Individual bankers at Cantor booked twice as much revenue as their counterparts at more famous Wall Street banks.

Government watchdogs say that Howard Lutnick and Cantor Fitzgerald are milking his new job for as much as they can. "In this administration the conflicts are so pervasive and rife, but I think it's fair to say that Lutnick does stand out," Robert Weissman, co-president of Public Citizen, told Salon, an online news site. "I think he gets a five-star rating for conflicts of interest."

"President Trump's billionaire Commerce Secretary has been playing the ultimate Washington insider game to pad his family's riches," said Tony Carrk, executive director of Accountable.US. "From the White House, Howard Lutnick has played a leading role in orchestrating Trump's Bitcoin reserve policy at the same time his family company was pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into the biggest corporate Bitcoin holder in the game – pushing up their stake by at least [US]\$300 million."

CRYPTO

Tether is the world's biggest issuer of stablecoins, but it has long struggled with legitimacy in the U.S. for two reasons: links to illicit activities like drug trafficking, money laundering and sanctions busting, and a veil of secrecy that it has maintained on where it holds the financial assets that back up the stablecoins it has issued. All this changed in 2021, when Tether quietly struck a deal with Cantor Fitzgerald to take custody of some US\$39 billion in U.S. treasury bills, in exchange for tens of millions of dollars in annual fees.

Soon after, Howard Lutnick arranged for Cantor to pay some US\$500 million to Tether to acquire a five percent stake in Tether. The bank is now helping Tether to raise US\$15 billion to US\$20 billion from other investors in exchange for a three percent stake. If the other investors agree to the terms, Tether will be worth US\$500 billion, which would result in a US\$25 billion payday for Cantor Fitzgerald.

Cantor is also involved in other cryptocurrencies. For example, the bank helped Trump Media & Technology Group, which is majority owned by President Trump, collect US\$2.5 billion from institutional investors to invest in bitcoin.

Not surprisingly Howard Lutnick was appointed as a member of a presidential crypto working group that Trump established via executive order to promote "lawful and legitimate dollar-backed stablecoins worldwide" and whose mandate involves reviewing regulations to be changed or abandoned.

Rumble

Cantor Fitzgerald arranged for Tether to buy US\$775 million of shares in Rumble, a video platform favored by Trump-supporting influencers. The deal was completed shortly after Trump's second inauguration.

This has been very helpful for the Truth Social platform, run by Trump Media and Technology Group, which uses Rumble's ad network. Donald Trump Jr., Trump's son, has a "seven-figure" deal with Rumble for the platform to exclusively carry his biweekly podcast. And Chris Pavlovski, founder and CEO of Rumble, was given a "new media" seat at the White House's daily press conference on February 12, 2025.

To that end, Lutnick used his soapbox as Commerce Secretary to promote crypto. “We’re using the blockchain. We’re using bitcoin. We are going to use digital assets to pound forward, and Donald Trump is leading the way,” he told a White House summit on the topic in March 2025.

DATA CENTERS

The Newmark Group, a real estate company owned by Cantor Fitzgerald, estimated that it had completed over US\$25 billion in data center deals in 2025 alone. Leading that list of deals was US\$7 billion in loans raised for Stargate’s first data center in Abilene, Texas, which analysts expect will use gas piped by Energy Transfer.

Another major deal announced by Newmark is a US\$350 million loan for the Fermi Data Center project in Amarillo, Texas, which also benefits from gas piped by Energy Transfer. In addition, Cantor Fitzgerald helped issue shares in early October that valued the company at over US\$12.5 billion.

Howard Lutnick and his sons have openly promoted the Fermi project. The father posed for a photo with Fermi CEO Toby Neugebauer in August 2025. Just months later Brandon Lutnick and his older brother Kyle Lutnick (who serves as executive vice chairman of Cantor Fitzgerald) boasted about cutting deals with Fermi in late 2025.

Newmark is also helping advise on US\$4 billion in financing for the CoreWeave data center project in Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Once again Howard Lutnick is cheerleading the industry. He joined Donald Trump at a conference in Pittsburgh in July 2025 that highlighted the Lancaster project. “The AI revolution is upon us,” Lutnick told attendees. “The Trump administration will not let us lose. We need to do clean, beautiful coal. We need to do natural gas, we need to embrace nuclear, we need to embrace it all because we have the power to do it and if we don’t do it, we’re fools.”

Critical Metals

Cantor Fitzgerald is a major investor in Critical Metals Corp, which has a permit to mine critical minerals in Greenland. The mining company has received a US\$120 million loan from the U.S. Export-Import Bank.

Notably, Trump has threatened to annex Greenland in order to gain access to critical minerals deemed essential for the tech industry as they are used in smartphones, laptops, electric vehicles and other products.



Image. Shutterstock

Palantir

When Nathan Bernard, an activist tracking immigration raids in Portland, Maine, filmed an ICE agent taking pictures of her in late January 2026, she questioned why he was photographing her. "Because we have a nice little database, and now you're considered a domestic terrorist," the masked agent replied.

Although the agent did not disclose details of the database he was referring to, U.S. government contracting records show that ICE and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) have multiple contracts with a company named Palantir to vacuum up digital data of everyday activity across the U.S. to create detailed profiles of individuals.

"ICE can use this type of surveillance apparatus on anyone – not only anyone who is undocumented but anyone who this administration wants to criminalize and anyone who the administration wants to put under surveillance," Jacinta González, head of programs at digital rights non-profit MediaJustice, told the *Guardian* newspaper in 2025.

Palantir was founded in 2003 and bankrolled by In-Q-Tel, the investment arm of the CIA, to build data analysis and surveillance tools for many U.S. military and national security agencies.

While it has a reputation for analyzing trillions of data points to track everyone at all times, in reality Palantir makes a living turning messy rows and columns of data into point and click maps with fancy charts and graphs that can be viewed on hand-held devices and computer screens to make it easy for analysts and decision makers to feel like they can see everything all at once, no matter how mundane or inaccurate the data is. (The company is named after the indestructible crystal balls from J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings*.) In recent years, Palantir has added another layer – the ability to pick an artificial intelligence chatbot to summarize the data and answer questions in simple English.



Photo: Cory Doctorow.
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In 2014, Palantir won a contract to build an analytic tool called Falcon for an ICE division named Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to search the data it was gathering for a Palantir-managed database called Investigative Case Management, which was based on Gotham, Palantir's standard product. The original contract allowed ICE personnel to track the hourly locations of specific individuals using their cell phone numbers and add in data from air travel records via the Advance Passenger Information System (APIS) and other datasets like the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) as well as from field interviews.

ImmigrationOS

While this original contract was signed during the presidency of Barack Obama, the contract was dramatically expanded under the second presidency of Donald Trump for an ICE division named Enforcement and Removals Operations (ERO). In April 2025, HSI paid Palantir US\$30 million to build a software program called ImmigrationOS to create a "streamlined end to end immigration lifecycle from identification to removal, with increased efficiency in deportation logistics."

Palantir has refused to provide details of what exactly it does, but some clues have surfaced in the media. A *CNN* report in 2025 suggested that the ImmigrationOS system would allow immigration

agents “to approve raids, book arrests, generate legal documents, and route individuals to deportation flights or detention — all from a single interface.”

By January 2026, an investigative website called *404 Media* revealed that ICE had deployed an artificial intelligence-powered tool named Enhanced Leads Identification & Targeting for Enforcement (ELITE), designed by Palantir, to summarize tips that it received. The website also revealed that ELITE helps “populate a map with potential deportation targets, brings up a dossier on each person, and provides a ‘confidence score’ on the person’s current address.”

The company acknowledged doing this kind of work in an internal memo reviewed by *Wired* magazine. “While acknowledging the reputational risk we face when supporting immigration enforcement operations ... we believe that our work could [provide] officers and agents with the data to make more precise, informed decisions,” wrote Akash Jain, president of Palantir’s U.S. government division.

Federal cash outlays for these projects have grown exponentially. In 2025, Palantir banked US\$81.1 million in ICE contracts from the Trump administration, a four-fold increase over the previous year. And it was awarded a new US\$1 billion “blanket purchase agreement” with DHS in February 2026 allowing individual departments to sign contracts with the company without going through competitive bidding, according to *Wired* magazine.

“The new deepening of Palantir’s ties with ICE through these new contracts is alarming for the human rights of dozens of immigrants and people seeking safety in the United States,” Likhita Banerji, deputy director of the Amnesty Tech program at Amnesty International, told *El País* newspaper. “These technologies can systemically fuel racism, discrimination, and oppression, and are routinely used to further racist and xenophobic agendas.”

Over a dozen former Palantir employees signed a letter last year condemning the new contracts. “Companies are placating Trump’s administration, suppressing dissent, and aligning with his xenophobic, sexist, and oligarchic agenda,” they wrote in May 2025. “Big Tech, including Palantir, is increasingly complicit, normalizing authoritarianism under the guise of a ‘revolution’ led by oligarchs.”

Tracking Tools

Palantir’s analysis of federal government data is augmented by a variety of companies that sell specialized tools to ICE that take advantage of location data and browsing history on mobile devices, which most people share without thinking twice.

“Whenever that little advert loads in your app, in Candy Crush or whatever, you’ll see an advert there in the background. There’s all of this tech going on where different companies are trying to get that advertisement in front of you,” Joseph Cox, founder of *404 Media*, told *Minneapolis Public Radio*. “There are also spy companies essentially harvesting that data, including phone location data. They then sell access to that to the government.”

One of the tools that ICE uses is called Webloc from Penlink, a company based in Nebraska, which allows users like ICE to draw a shape around a location, such as an apartment block, a park, a protest site or even just a traffic intersection. Webloc immediately lists all the phones located in the area and then allows users to track where that phone has traveled – to an office, a hospital and where it is kept at night.

Since this data has been bought legally, ICE does not need a warrant or subpoena. Penlink also sells a product called Tangles, a social media monitoring tool which gathers data from sites like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok or Twitter that is used to complement other data gathered by Palantir.

Other tools used by ICE include facial recognition apps like Clearview AI, made by a New York city company, and Mobile Fortify, made by NEC from Tokyo, Japan, that scrape images from the public Internet. A lawsuit filed by the Illinois attorney general in January 2026 alleged that Mobile Fortify had been used over 100,000 times.

The company’s technology has even drawn criticism from top Silicon Valley investors. “If you’re a first-rate programmer, there are a huge number of other places you can go work rather than at the company building the infrastructure of the police state,” Paul Graham, founder of Y Combinator, which provided seed funds

Peter Thiel

Peter Thiel, a major co-founder of Palantir, is a tech entrepreneur. He made his initial fortune as a co-founder of PayPal, the financial technology company. He also made a lot of money as the first outside investor in Facebook in 2004, the year after he and Karp started Palantir. (Karp and Thiel became friends at Stanford Law School where they studied together.)

In addition to being famous as an investor, Thiel is also well known for his support of conservative politicians. He has been a major donor to the Republican party for over 25 years. Beginning in 2016, he donated US\$1.5 million to pro-Trump groups and was appointed to Trump's first transition team. His biggest contribution to the new Trump administration was his early and consistent support for JD Vance, Trump's vice-president. The two men were business partners in 2015, and Thiel gave Vance US\$15 million to run for the US Senate in 2022.

During the 2024 election cycle, Thiel claimed to be disappointed in Trump. "They couldn't get the most basic pieces of the government to work. So that was—I think that part was maybe worse than even my low expectations," he told the *Atlantic* magazine in 2023. But he hasn't given up. "If you hold a gun to my head, I'll vote for Trump," he said one year later.

Now that Palantir's growth has mushroomed under Trump's second administration, Thiel's tune has changed - he has ramped up his political donations in support of Republicans for the 2026 midterm elections.

to companies like Airbnb, Coinbase, Dropbox, Instacart and Reddit, wrote on Twitter.

In addition to the concerns over mass surveillance and the indiscriminate invasion of individual privacy to collect this data, there are two other major concerns about the use of this technology:

First, despite the voluminous data that this software can vacuum up, it fails to find criminals who have a basic knowledge of how to cover up their tracks. John Sandweg, a former ICE director under Barack Obama,



PeterThiel. Photo: Gage Skidmore.
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told the *Economist* magazine that in reality most of the data is harvested from millions of "undocumented but otherwise law-abiding people" who use cell phones, drive to work or school, pay taxes, and use credit cards.

Second, the use of software-driven tools often leads to erroneous conclusions. For example, DHS admitted to *CNN* that a website it created to list 25,000 of the "worst of the worst" individuals was filled with mistakes, after reporters identified thousands of people who had been listed for minor traffic offenses. *NOTUS*, an online news agency, also found that seven of eight people named as violent criminals in a White House press release were incorrectly identified. DHS claimed that the error rate was just five percent.

However, a more comprehensive review of forms submitted by ICE to justify deportation of some 140,000 people in 2025, conducted by the *Guardian* newspaper, found that some 77 percent did not have any criminal record. And for those 23 percent who did have some kind of police record, just 0.5 percent were for homicide and 9 percent for sexual assault.

Even ICE agents have complained that Palantir's ELITE is deeply flawed, in testimony provided to an Oregon court in December 2025. "The app could say 100 percent, and it's wrong. The person doesn't live there. And so it's not accurate. It's a tool that we use that gives you probability, but there's ... no such thing as 100 percent," said one agent.

For example, Nicole Leland, a director at Target

corporation in Minnesota, was following federal officers conducting deportation raids at a Mexican supermarket in January 2026, when she was pulled over by a Border Patrol agent in a white SUV. She was startled when the agent addressed her by name.

“He said he had facial recognition and that his body camera was on,” she told the *New York Times*. Three days later her flight travel privileges were revoked. Leland decided to join a lawsuit against DHS, challenging the decision.

(A DHS spokesperson told *NBC News* that the tools were legal. “Mobile Fortify has not been blocked, restricted, or curtailed by the courts or by legal guidance. It is lawfully used nationwide in accordance with all applicable legal authorities,” the spokesperson said.)

ICE also recently activated a contract to use a tool called Graphite, made by Paragon Solutions of Tel Aviv, Israel, that allows it to hack into phones remotely to read WhatsApp and Signal messages. (The original contract was signed by the Biden administration.)

Details of these government contracts are often available on federal government websites, including the US\$23.9 million contract with NEC, US\$9.2 million in contracts for Clearview AI, some US\$2.3 million in contracts for Penlink and US\$2 million in contracts for Paragon Solutions.

Project Maven

Project Maven, a secretive Pentagon project to analyze the deluge of data from dozens of sources – notably military aircraft and drones as well as satellite and cellphone data - hunting for targets to kill, also uses Palantir as its principal contractor.

Vice Admiral Frank Whitworth, the director of the U.S. National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which runs Maven, explained the goal of Palantir’s Maven Smart System (MSS), at a gathering of military contractors at a conference in May 2025. “Army leaders, specifically, are trying to leverage Maven to meet a new vision for units to make a thousand high-quality decisions – choosing and dismissing targets on the battlefield – in one hour,” he said.

Tragedy struck less than a year later on February 28, 2026, when Trump launched Operation Epic Fury against Iran. A Tomahawk missile fired at a military facility instead hit the Shajareh Tayyebbeh primary school in Minab in southern Iran, killing over 100 little girls and dozens of others, despite the fact that any visual inspection of the neighborhood would have shown that it had been used daily as an educational facility for over a decade.

Experts say that the reliance on automated computer data analysis was the problem. “The building in Minab had been classified as a military facility in a Defense Intelligence Agency database. People failed to update a database, and other people built a system fast enough to make that failure lethal,” writes Kevin Banker, a military historian. “It is a bureaucratic question about what happened to the kill chain, and the answer is Palantir.”



Mourners at Minab. Photo: Mehdi Dashti Rahmatabadi. Used under Creative Commons license.

Palantir has refused to divulge what Maven does but it does not deny that it has played a role. "If you look at the present day conflict in Iran, the sort of planning that we were able to do with one person in two weeks is something that in Gulf War II actually took 50 people six months," Palantir Technologies CTO Shyam Sankar, and one of the chief architects of Maven, told *Fox News*.

Sankar explained the evolution of the company software to a reporter at *Colossus* magazine, describing how he was sent to Afghanistan and Iraq at the height of the U.S. wars to help soldiers use a standard Palantir program called Gotham to turn

Alex Karp

The CEO of Palantir is Alex Karp. Despite the fact that Palantir is essentially a software company, Karp is neither a programmer nor a businessman. Instead, he studied philosophy and social theory as well as law.

Karp has benefitted from his friendship with Peter Thiel, his former colleague at Stanford law school, whose hugely successful business PayPal developed software to track criminals by connecting multiple different financial databases. In 2003, Thiel hired Karp to run Palantir and to market the idea that such software could also be used to uncover “terrorist” networks. This soon attracted the attention and US\$2 million in funding from In-Q-Tel, the investment arm of the CIA.

Palantir grew its reputation in the intelligence business by sending its staff (like Shyam Sankar, the current chief technology officer) into war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq to help soldiers analyze data. Over the next decade, the company slowly chalked up key contracts with the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement as well as with others like Britain’s National Health Service.

Neither the company nor the CEO made major donations to the Republicans until Trump was elected the second time, according to data compiled by OpenSecrets. Indeed Karp himself donated to Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. But in January 2024, Karp donated US\$1 million to Trump’s inauguration.

Immediately following that Karp hit the jackpot largely because his software was uniquely positioned to satisfy Trump’s demands that his officials track down “illegal aliens” and find targets to bomb in Iran. In the months since the 2025 inauguration, Palantir has won some US\$1.4 billion in government contracts.

rows and columns of data into what he called “pointillist paintings” of objects that were easy for them to understand.

Fast forward to 2018. Drew Cukor, a Marine Corps intelligence officer, who was put in charge of Project



Alex Karp. Photo: UK Government.
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Maven (officially called the Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional team) at the Pentagon, ran into a roadblock: a group of engineers and programmers at Google (the principal Maven contractor at the time) had put together a petition to ask the company to pull out. “We believe that Google should not be in the business of war. Building this technology to assist the US Government in military surveillance – and potentially lethal outcomes – is not acceptable,” they wrote. Google bowed to their demands and withdrew from renewing the contract.

Palantir, on the other hand, had no such scruples. Over the last few years, the company has taken over Maven and created a single window dashboard like Google Earth for military commanders to be able to zoom and click on pictures and links without having to dig deep into the raw data. (The idea, according to Katrina Manson, author of a book on the project, was to create an “aspirational single pane of glass to clear up the fog of war.”)

“You could think of it really as an operating system for data. So, it enables large, complex organizations that will have collected data of myriad different kinds scattered across dozens, hundreds, even thousands of source systems,” Louis Mosley, executive vice president of Palantir for Europe and the UK, told the *Washington Post*.

“How do you begin to make sense of all of that information? How do you assemble it into a virtual representation of that physical reality, which can then be exploited by AI? Synthesis of that entire data

Data Storage

Palantir's products – like ELITE, Gotham, ImmigrationOS and Maven – act as a middle layer between data and artificial intelligence chatbots like Anthropic's Claude, Google's Gemini and OpenAI's ChatGPT.

The data itself is stored on a variety of cloud platforms like Azure (owned by Microsoft), Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Google. *Wired* magazine estimates that ICE has spent at least US\$94 million on Microsoft, at least US\$51 million on Amazon, and almost US\$1 million on Google while Customs and Border Patrol paid at least US\$81 million on Microsoft, at least US\$158 million on Amazon, and at least US\$7 million on Google.

Wired estimated that ICE was storing almost 1,400 terabytes of data – equal to approximately 490 million images – as of the end of January 2026.

landscape into what we call an ontology—you could think of that a bit like a data model or a digital twin, the virtual representation of the physical reality is essential."

Maven allows commanders to ask questions in simple English and provides answers generated by artificial intelligence software in the form of "heat maps" with possible targets, even suggesting which weapons to use and when. It does this with the help of Palantir's new Artificial Intelligence Platform (AIP) that allows users to choose a chatbot such as Anthropic's Claude, Google's Gemini and OpenAI's ChatGPT to interpret the data. (Palantir does not sell its own artificial intelligence software.)

Moseley insists that Palantir simply provides the tools, and the military makes the final decision on what to bomb. "This is not our role to decide life or death," he told the *BBC*. "AI platforms like Maven have been instrumental to the management of the conflict, but responsibility always remains with the military organization."

Critics say that this is precisely the problem. "If there's a risk of killing and you co-opt a lot of your critical thinking to software that will take care of these things for you, then you just become reliant on the software,"

Elke Schwarz, a professor at Queen Mary University of London, told the *BBC*. "It's a race to the bottom."

For gung-ho and damn-the-details leaders like Trump, Maven is a gift from heaven. "Palantir Technologies (PLTR) has proven to have great war fighting capabilities and equipment. Just ask our enemies!!!" Trump posted on social media on April 10, 2026.

Palantir, for its part, has taken the opportunity to promote the visual interfaces that it builds for data-driven decision making at other government entities. "It is, in fact, the same software being used for healthcare systems, for example," Moseley told the *Post*. "But of course, the ontology, instead of looking like a tank or an aircraft or a drone, those objects, it's a patient, a clinician, a treatment."

Indeed, Palantir's data synthesis systems are currently being used by the UK National Health System under

Gaza

Palantir's technologies have also been used by Israel for its ongoing war against Lebanon and Palestine. Just as with ELITE, ImmigrationOS and Maven, Palantir helps fuse data from other sources such as Cellebrite mobile forensics, Verint SIGINT intercepts and AnyVision (Oosto) facial recognition. The tool also provides Israeli soldiers an artificial intelligence query layer on top.

"The company's technology was deployed by the Israelis during military operations in Lebanon in 2024 that decimated Hezbollah's top leadership," wrote Michael Steinberger, in an authorized biography of Alex Karp, the CEO of Palantir.

"It was also used in Operation Grim Beeper, in which hundreds of Hezbollah fighters were injured and maimed when their pagers and walkie-talkies exploded (the Israelis booby trapped the devices)."

A report by Francesca Albanese, the United Nations Special Rapporteur, suggests that Palantir's products have also been used by the Israelis in "predictive policing" of Palestinians for several years and in merging battlefield data for automated decision-making throughout Israel's genocide in Gaza.

a £330 million contract to centralize patient information and facilitate health trend analysis.

However, not unlike ELITE, ImmigrationOS and Project Maven, new reports suggest that Palantir's software has failed to help British hospitals. For example, Palantir claimed that it had cut inpatients surgery waiting lists at the Chelsea & Westminster Hospitals in London by 28 percent, when raw data seen by the *British Medical Journal* showed the opposite. (Lists of patients waiting for general surgery rose by 12.6 percent and gynaecology rose by 4 percent).

British doctors have denounced the contract and are refusing to use the Palantir system.

"If Palantir's software is being used to target individuals in immigration enforcement and is being deployed in active conflict zones, then that's completely incompatible with the values we uphold in the delivery of care," Dr David Wrigley, the deputy chair of the British Medical Association said in a statement.

Anduril Enterprises

Palmer Luckey is the founder of Anduril Enterprises, a start-up that is building "autonomous" weapons and surveillance systems that use artificial intelligence to detect targets. The company is developing prototypes of drone aircraft with names like Ghost and Fury as well as Sentry Tower, a 10-meter-high solar powered transportable watchtower that has been deployed on the U.S.-Mexico border. (Like Palantir, the company is named after a device in The Lord of the Rings book trilogy, namely a sword).

At first sight, Luckey seems unlikely to be the head of a weapons company. He prefers to wear Hawaiian shirts and sandals in public rather than business suits.

He made his first fortune at age 22 after developing virtual reality glasses and selling the technology to Facebook for US\$2 billion. Since then he has indulged his money and time into developing futuristic weaponry.

It helps that Luckey is a major Trump supporter. He hosted a fundraiser for Trump at his home in Newport Beach, California in October 2020, for which donors paid between US\$2,800 a person to US\$150,000 per couple. He hosted another such fundraiser in June 2024.

"I was actually one of the true Trump OGs," Luckey told a radio show host in October 2025. "I wrote a letter to Donald Trump when I was 15 telling him that he should run for president." (OG stands for 'original gangster.') "How can Trump be the warmonger when he's the guy saying we need to stop fighting these wars, get out of these other countries, get our boots back in the U.S. and not get in a fight with Russia, China, or any other country that we don't have to get into?"

Whether he meant to be ironic or not, less than a fortnight after Trump ordered an attack on Iran, his company was awarded a US\$20 billion weapons contract from the Trump administration to build autonomous weapons systems for future warfare.



Palmer Luckey. Photo: Stephen McCarthy. Used under Creative Commons license.

Prison Profiteers

While Donald Trump and his friends in Silicon Valley are betting heavily on artificial intelligence and crypto-technologies to make a quick buck from data mining, others are cashing in on the fact that this data mining also generates real world possibilities of making money in the bricks-and-mortar world.

Notably prison companies like CoreCivic and GEO Group as well as private flight brokers like CSI Aviation have cashed in on the fact that the individuals tracked by Palantir are being rounded up and deported as per Trump's election promises.

"I gave a free hand to our great ICE agents and let them do their jobs. These are brave people. We sent home nearly 1 million illegals during my first term, and we will far surpass that number," Trump told an election rally in Dubuque, Iowa, on September 19, 2023. "We will carry out the largest domestic deportation operation in American history."

At his January 2025 inauguration, Trump doubled-down on his campaign promises. "I will declare a national emergency at our southern border. All illegal entry will immediately be halted, and we will begin the process of returning millions and millions of criminal aliens back to the places in which they came," he said in his first speech.

"We believe our company faces an unprecedented opportunity at this time to play a role in supporting President Trump's new administration policies," George Zoley, the CEO of GEO Group, told investors on a February 27, 2025 earnings call. "We've taken several important steps to be prepared to meet that opportunity."

His sentiments echoed remarks by Damon Hininger, then-CEO of CoreCivic, on a February 11, 2025 earnings call. "I have worked at CoreCivic for 32 years, and this is truly one of the most exciting periods in my



Photo: [Mani Albrecht](#), U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Used under Creative Commons license.



Photo: [ICE](#)
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career with the company,” Hininger told investors.

The two companies immediately got ready to reactivate major prisons across the country from Delaney Hall in Newark, New Jersey, to California City, California, in order to profit from Trump’s plans.

In addition, CSI Aviation capitalized on Trump’s deportation agenda by enlisting its network of private charter airlines.

A Project on Government Oversight review of immigration-related contracts awarded in 2025 showed that CSI Aviation was awarded US\$1.2 billion in contracts (a 238 percent increase over the previous year), GEO Group just over US\$710 million, while CoreCivic received US\$269 million in contracts, placing all three in the top five of ICE contractors.

Profiteering from Trump’s deportation agenda is just the tip of the iceberg for these three companies - all three have also been accused of human rights abuse as well as inhumane living conditions in the detention centers, as we document in our profiles of these companies.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has eviscerated accountability mechanisms over ICE detention facilities by eliminating the Office of the Immigration Detention Ombudsman as well as prohibiting surprise visits by members of Congress to check on the detention facilities.

GEO Group

In early May 2025, Ras Baraka, the mayor of Newark, New Jersey, was arrested for attempting to inspect the Delaney Hall detention center in his city. The center is run by GEO Group, a private prison company, on behalf of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

Baraka was challenging GEO Group's newly awarded 15-year long contract with ICE worth US\$1 billion to re-open and expand Delaney Hall in order to detain and hold as many as 1,000 people at a time, despite the fact that the company did not have proper construction permits nor had it conducted legally required safety checks. This February 27, 2025 contract was designed to be the centerpiece of the Trump administration's plan to arrest and deport hundreds of thousands of migrants.



Ras Baraka. Photo: [Lorie Shaul](#).
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“The agreement between ICE and the GEO Group to use Delaney Hall with the intention of incarcerating and holding immigrants slated for deportation does not supersede the ordinances and procedures legislated by the City of Newark and the State of New Jersey,” Baraka said in a statement in late March. “It is an opportunity for them to make billions of dollars.”

Revolving Door

The Project on Government Oversight, an independent watchdog, compiled a list of high-ranking GEO officials who worked for the U.S. government: the list included Henry Lucero, who oversaw deportation officers under the Trump administration as well as Daniel Ragsdale and Daniel Bible, who worked for the Obama and Biden administrations respectively.

David Venturella, a veteran ICE official, was appointed head of GEO's client relations where the firm's biggest client was ICE. He retired in 2023 but was invited back by Trump to run ICE in May 2026.

And Tom Homan - the U.S. “border czar” appointed by the White House - previously worked for GEO as a paid consultant.

These connections are “illustrative of the perverse influence the private prison industry has over how our taxpayer dollars are spent,” Jesse Franzblau, associate director of policy for the National Immigrant Justice Center, an immigrant rights nonprofit, wrote in an email to the *Washington Post* newspaper.

Many of these executives have contributed lavishly to Trump. For example, leading GEO executives contributed a total of almost US\$1.5 million to Trump's 2024 presidential campaign and associated entities. In fact, GEO was the first company whose Political Action Committee (PAC) contributed the maximum to Trump's 2024 presidential run.

In December 2024, GEO Group donated US\$500,000 to Trump's inauguration celebrations.

‘It’s not about anything else. It’s about folks making billions of dollars off of the backs of working people, particularly Black and Brown people.’

Furious Trump administration officials backed Baraka’s arrest in May, claiming that his demand to enter and inspect the facility was illegal. “He has willingly chosen to disregard the law. That will not stand in this state. He has been taken into custody. NO ONE IS ABOVE THE LAW,” Alina Habba, interim U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, wrote on X (formerly Twitter).

(The charges against Baraka were dropped a few days after his arrest, and he had the last laugh when Habba was forced to resign in December, after judges ruled that she had been kept illegally in office by Trump.)

Baraka’s arrest – a remarkable action by the Trump administration against a sitting mayor of a major U.S. city – shone a spotlight on the vast expansion of the private prison-industrial complex that has benefited from Trump’s war on migrants.

GEO Group

Boca Raton, Florida-based GEO Group was founded in 1984 as Wackenhut Corrections Corporation, a division of the Wackenhut Corporation, and renamed a decade later when it became a publicly-traded company.

GEO owns detention centers in 15 U.S. states as well as private prisons and other incarceration facilities in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

Under the second Trump administration, the company has been awarded multiple contracts to re-open detention centers in addition to Delaney Hall, such as:

- **North Lake Correctional Facility** in Baldwin, Michigan (worth US\$70 million in annual revenue)
- **Karnes ICE Processing Center** in Karnes City, Texas (worth US\$79 million in its first year)
- **D. Ray James Facility** in Folkston, Georgia (worth US\$66 million annually)

BI, a GEO subsidiary, also has a contract to electronically monitor migrants under ICE's Alternatives to Detention program. To do this, the

company supplies ankle monitors and "smart" watches as well as tracking software. The company gets paid approximately US\$1 every time a migrant uses BI's SmartLink app to take a selfie and US\$3 a day to use the VeriWatch smartwatches.

Pro-Palestine Detainees

The company continued to hit news headlines over its support for Trump’s deportation policies in March 2025 when Mahmoud Khalil and Rümeysa Öztürk, two international students who expressed solidarity with Palestine in the wake of the massive Israeli genocide in Gaza, were imprisoned at two different sites operated by the company in Louisiana, as the Trump administration attempted to showcase its desire to clamp down on pro-Palestine university campus protests.

Both Khalil and Öztürk were eventually released and spoke out against GEO.



Mahmoud Khalil. Photo: Office of Representative Jim McGovern. Used under Creative Commons license.

“The conditions inside were very dire.... the food is inedible. It was very cold,” Khalil told *National Public Radio*, about his detention at the LaSalle Detention Center in Jena, Louisiana. “You have no privacy whatsoever, sort of sleeping with over 70 men in the room, and no one explaining to you what’s happening or what will happen.”

“I cannot remember a night when I didn’t go to sleep hungry,” Khalil told the *Associated Press* news agency. He said he was denied his ulcer medication and that he dropped 15 pounds (7 kilograms) in body weight.

Öztürk described similar experiences at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center.

"The food in the dining hall was low-quality and unhealthy....[Our] dining experiences left us grappling with digestion issues and persistent stomach aches," Öztürk wrote in an article for *Vanity Fair* magazine.

"During my 45 days there, I was kept in damp, dusty, overcrowded conditions with poor air and triggers that made my asthma significantly worse. Once, when I suffered a severe asthma attack, the officers did not respond until many women began banging on the windows to get their attention. Afterward, I was not even allowed to take a few minutes of fresh air, being told that it was a risk to the officers' safety," she added. "Our requests [for medical help] would often go unanswered for weeks—and according to my friends, sometimes even months....From cancer to colds to women's diseases, ibuprofen was the magical pill the medical staff offered. When I asked questions, they responded that they couldn't 'babysit' me."



Rümeysa Öztürk. Photo: [Office of Representative Ayanna Pressley](#). Used under Creative Commons license.

Abuse Allegations

Reports about other detainees held at GEO facilities around the country have been grim.

In September 2025, some 475 workers—mostly Korean migrant workers—laboring at the joint Hyundai-LG Energy Solutions battery plant in Ellabell, Georgia were detained by ICE and held at the Folkston ICE Processing Center in Georgia.

"They tied our hands behind our backs like criminals. We had to bend down to drink water from the floor," Kim Ji-hoon, an electrician who was one of the detainees, told *Dong-a Ilbo*, a major Korean newspaper. "We were just trying to work and survive," he added. "No one should be treated like this."

"We were kept in a room with almost no light. The bathroom had no doors—just a sheet. We were treated like animals," Park Min-seo, another detained worker told the same newspaper.

Four detainees filed a formal complaint against GEO's South Louisiana ICE Processing Center, alleging that company staff were guilty of sexual assault, harassment, forced labor, retaliatory solitary confinement and denial of medical attention.

"Our rights are being violated everyday. This is a privately run facility that profits from our suffering. They are using us to make a profit but denying us medical care, food, even the most basic things like proper clothes and mattresses," Monica Renteria-Gonzalez, one of the four detainees, said in a statement. "Regardless of our immigration status, at the end of the day we are human beings and we still have rights and feelings and we still matter, even if we are detained."

Protests

Protests against the company's contracts have spread across the U.S.

In June 2025, Michigan residents staged a protest along the M-37 highway against GEO's plans to reopen the North Lake Correctional Facility. "We don't want a Michigan where our children grow up in the shadow of the largest ICE detention center in the Midwest," Maggie Doyle, a volunteer with No Detention Centers in Michigan, told *ABC 7 Chicago* television.

The following month, approximately 100 demonstrators gathered near GEO's Boca Raton headquarters to protest ICE's business ties with the private prison industry.

"Detaining people for profit is morally indefensible," Myra Kremenitzer, founder of grassroots movement

Indivisible's Boca Raton chapter, told *WLRN* radio. "The GEO Group has built a business model around the suffering of vulnerable individuals, many of whom are fleeing violence, persecution, and poverty. This is not justice—it's exploitation."

In September 2025, activists also rallied in Pennsylvania, calling for the GEO-run Moshannon Valley Processing Center in Philipsburg to be shut down. As detention capacity has increased, so has GEO's monthly invoices. "Behind every invoice is a real person being separated from their family and locked in a cage," Bobbi Erickson, an activist with the Shut Down Detention Campaign, a coalition opposed to for-profit prisons, told *USA Today* newspaper.

Back in New Jersey, protests have only grown in the 12 months since the mayor of Newark was arrested. On May 22, 2026, a group of 300 prisoners went on hunger strike inside Delaney Hall over the living conditions. Hundreds of supporters rallied outside in support - including Mikie Sherrill, the current governor of New Jersey, and Andy Kim, one of the two U.S. senators for New Jersey.

Videos show ICE agents breaking up the protest outside with batons, pepper balls, and pepper spray, even striking the senator.

Similar scenes were reported inside. "We started getting calls from inside that the jail guards, 40 of them, were coming through two of the units, beating people with batons and throwing chemical agent canisters into the hallway," Kathy O'Leary with Pax Christi USA told *CBS News*.

"The people inside Delaney Hall deserve their day in court and to be treated humanely, not violently. The time is now to shut this broken facility down," Senator Kim told *NJBIZ*. "This company, GEO Group, got a billion-dollar contract from ICE to run Delaney Hall."

"They have one full-time doctor for 800 detainees. They could hire more doctors. That would just be less profit for GEO Group. They could hire and get better food. But that's just again less profit."

Company Response

The company is proud of the new contracts. "Over the past year, we've captured new growth, making it the most successful period for new business wins in our company's history," GEO chairman George Zoley told investors on a February 12, 2026 earnings call.

Indeed GEO reported US\$707.7 million in revenue in 2025's fourth quarter, an almost 16.5 percent increase compared to the same time in 2024.



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CoreCivic

In late August 2025, around 500 migrants were taken to a detention center in California City in the Mojave desert some 100 miles north of Los Angeles. This former state government-run facility, which was shuttered in 2023, was re-opened under contract to CoreCivic, a private prison giant, to house a surge in U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detainees.

“The living conditions are inhumane. We have all kinds of health hazards. It’s dirty, they don’t clean up or have any chemicals to clean. It’s unsanitary,” Sokhean Keo, a detainee at the facility, told the *Fresno Bee* newspaper.

Other detainees described the facility as “a torture chamber,” “a zoo” and “hell on earth.” Alfredo Parada Calderon, a California City detainee, told the *Guardian* newspaper: “We are civilians. They treat us like a bunch of animals.”

Another detainee who asked to be referred to as Jon (a pseudonym) told the *Guardian* that the CoreCivic staff would often yell: ‘Get your hands on the wall and spread your legs.’ When detainees asked why, the guards would say: ‘It’s procedure. If you don’t like it, too bad.’”

A month after it opened, approximately 100 of the detainees conducted sit-ins and refused to eat to protest their mistreatment. CoreCivic officers retaliated by pepper-spraying some of the protestors, putting others in solitary confinement, hreatening force while delaying medications to some and restricting telephone access.

“No matter how you spin it, these are prisons,” Faisal Al-Juburi of the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, an immigrant rights group in Texas, told the *Miami Herald* newspaper. Yet roughly half of ICE detainees have no criminal record and are being held on civil charges.



Photo: [Peg Hunter](#)
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CoreCivic

CoreCivic, a Brentwood, Tennessee-based company (formerly known as Corrections Corporation of America), runs 44 correctional and detention facilities and 20 residential re-entry centers, or “halfway houses,” across 20 U.S. states.

The American Civil Liberties Union, a human rights group, alleges that the company has a long history of mismanagement, forced labor, inhumane living conditions, excessive use of force, prolonged use of solitary confinement, medical negligence, physical and sexual abuse, spying and voyeurism, overcrowding, understaffing and other human rights violations at its various detention facilities.

Despite this, the Trump administration will pay CoreCivic up to US\$130 million in annual revenue to operate the California City Immigration Processing Center, California’s largest ICE detention facility, through August 2027.

It is just one of many facilities that have been pressed into service or expanded to handle the thousands of people detained under Trump’s “national emergency.”

New Contracts

The Trump administration has also awarded contracts to CoreCivic to reopen or take over the following facilities:

- **South Texas Family Residential Center** in Dilley, Texas (worth US\$180 million annually)
- **Midwest Regional Reception Center** in Leavenworth, Kansas (worth US\$60 million annually)
- **Farmville Detention Center** in Farmville, Virginia (worth US\$40 million annually)
- **Diamondback Correctional Facility** in Watonga, Oklahoma (worth US\$100 million annually)
- **West Tennessee Detention Facility** in Mason, Tennessee (worth up to US\$35 million annually)
- facilities in **Mississippi, Nevada, Ohio and Oklahoma**.

Since Trump’s return to the Oval Office, CoreCivic executives have boasted about speaking on an almost “hourly” basis with ICE officials and members of the Trump administration to assist ICE in its goal of expanding detention capacity to over 107,000 by January 2026 and beyond.

Pushback

Immigrant rights advocates are supporting the California City detainees. They have accused the city of not enforcing state laws that require public meetings and adequate notice before permits are issued for privately-run immigration detention centers.

California City Mayor Marquette Hawkins has dismissed the protestors’ concerns, maintaining that conditions at the facility appeared to be humane and claiming that the city is unable to shutter the project, which is expected to produce millions of dollars in revenue to the city.

The lack of support from city officials has fueled detainees and activists to take matters into their own hands. In mid-September 2025, a California City detainee, anonymously identified as John Doe, and Dignity Not Detention Coalition, a group of immigrant rights organizations, sued the city and CoreCivic, accusing the company of illegally opening the detention center without the necessary permits.

“Because the city wasn’t really working with us or following California law, we sued both the city and CoreCivic,” Jehan Laner, senior staff attorney with the Immigrant Legal Resource Center, told the Fresno Bee newspaper. “You didn’t do anything that you would have done for a restaurant to open in California City.”

Trump Donations

In 2024, CoreCivic executives donated a combined total of US\$816,000 to Political Action Committees (PACs) supporting Trump’s presidential campaign including US\$288,400 from the CEO (Hininger) at the time. Later, CoreCivic donated US\$500,000 to the Trump-Vance inaugural committee.

On November 12, seven detainees sued ICE over conditions at the California City facility, alleging filthy living units, extremely cold temperatures, grossly subpar medical care, insufficient food and water, limitations on family visits, excessive solitary confinement, failure to accommodate religious activities, failure to accommodate people with disabilities and denial of access to legal counsel.

“No human being, immigrant or not, should be subjected to these horrendous conditions,” said Gustavo Guevara, one of the plaintiffs. “I hope society becomes aware of the abuse, neglect, indifference, and the overall unjust treatment we are being subjected to, and does not turn a blind eye. It’s not right that because we’re immigrants they feel they can treat us this way.”

A second battlefield has opened against CoreCivic in Leavenworth, Kansas, where community members are opposing CoreCivic’s plans to reopen its Leavenworth facility, which has previously been described by a U.S. federal judge as “an absolute hell hole.”

When CoreCivic announced in 2025 that it would be reactivating the facility without a permit pursuant to a no-bid contract with ICE, local residents and former employees testified against allowing the company to do so. (This is a city where Trump won over 60 percent of the 2024 general election vote.)

“They’re not looking out for the safety of their inmates or staff,” Marcia Levering, a former correctional officer at the Leavenworth facility, told the *Marshall Project*, a nonprofit that covers the criminal justice system. “They’re looking out for their own self-interest, which is taking the taxpayers’ money to line the pockets of their higher-ups.”

After a unanimous City resolution was passed, requiring CoreCivic to comply with a local ordinance, the city of Leavenworth filed a lawsuit to block CoreCivic from reopening the center without a proper permit.

A Kansas judge issued a temporary injunction prohibiting CoreCivic from reopening the center while the litigation was pending, prompting CoreCivic to appeal the decision.

CoreCivic suffered another blow when a separate case it filed against the city of Leavenworth was tossed out by the court in late November. The company then reversed course and applied for a permit in December.

Leavenworth residents and activists again mobilized to ask that city officials deny CoreCivic’s permit application. “I’m here tonight to ask and encourage you to continue defending Leavenworth from the historic mismanagement and negligence of CoreCivic and to do what you can to block CoreCivic and ICE from opening a detention center here in our community,” James Gillcrist, an Iraq War veteran, said during a public comment session at a city council meeting.

Despite the public’s strong vocal opposition, the city commission approved CoreCivic’s permit application in March 2026. Activists, however, remain undeterred. “Our work here, throughout the entire three years that we’ve been involved in this, is not in vain,” Karla Juarez, executive director of Advocates for Immigrant Rights and Reconciliation, an organizing group in Kansas and Missouri, said after the final commission meeting. “I see new faces. I see new people advocating. New people making public comments. New people, actually a lot of people who believed that CoreCivic should open, now on our side.”

‘I had eaten worms’

California City and Leavenworth are hardly alone.

In October 2025, detainees at Farmville Detention Center in Farmville, Virginia reported worms in their food, calling for a meeting with CoreCivic and ICE officials. “The situation scared us. Once we noticed that there were worms in several other people’s food, I felt sick. I had eaten worms,” said one detainee.

That same month, CoreCivic staff at the South Central Correctional Facility in Wayne County, Tennessee were accused of violence, extortion, drug abuse and neglect.

Amelia Waters, whose son is held at the center, told the *Nashville Banner*, an online newspaper: “When they do get food, which is not regular — it sometimes can be 2 p.m. before they get breakfast — the food is mostly inedible.”

Amy, the mother of a man who was transferred to the same center, said that he saw “sewage ...backing up in the floor, backing up in the showers.”

The Cibola County Correctional Center, operated by CoreCivic in New Mexico, is under investigation by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for alleged drug smuggling and violence. A detainee recalled being threatened along with his friend by a drug dealer at the center in May 2025, telling the *Guardian* newspaper that the dealer said, ‘I’ll give each of you [US]\$500. Accept it, or I’ll kill you.’ And we stood there with our mouths open.”

Earlier, *Wired* magazine reported that the CoreCivic-run Stewart Detention Center in Lumpkin, Georgia was experiencing overcrowding and a surge in medical emergencies. “[O]nce Trump took over, they were rolling out mats in the halls. People were sleeping out there,” Emelie (a pseudonym), whose husband was detained at Stewart until his deportation in May 2025, told the magazine. “You don’t stand a chance at Stewart,” she added. “It’s a death sentence for you and your family.”

CoreCivic’s Eloy Detention Center in Arizona has also been accused of exposing detainees to dangers, including extreme heat. “Sometimes the A/C goes out for a week. Sometimes 15 days,” a detainee said in a statement provided by the Florence Immigrant and Refugee Rights Project, a nonprofit legal services organization. Another detainee said that the heat “makes you feel like you’re suffocating.”

At least seven rapes and four attempted sexual assaults were reported at CoreCivic’s Otay Mesa immigration detention center in San Diego, California, in 2025. However, *CalMatters* journalists discovered that the local sheriff’s office took no action because it had signed a memorandum of understanding allowing the company to look into the allegations internally.

“We’re horrified but not surprised to learn that numerous sexual assaults went uninvestigated at a CoreCivic facility,” said Susan Beaty, senior attorney with the California Collaborative for Immigrant Justice advocacy group.

Making matters worse is the fact that ICE has refused to allow local county inspectors to visit the site.

And in Texas, state officials reported a measles outbreak in February 2026 at the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, run by CoreCivic, where some 1,400 people were being held, including children and infants.

“The active measles infections at Dilley have only exacerbated our grave concerns. This is an untenable situation with a simple solution — families should never be detained,” Neha Desai, a lawyer for the National Center for Youth Law, told the *Texas Tribune*. “Some children have come in sick and have gotten worse while detained. Others have come in relatively healthy and become seriously ill while detained.”



Company Response

Meanwhile, the company has been gushing about its new contracts with the Trump administration. “Never in our 42-year company history have we had so much activity and demand for our services as we are seeing right now,” Damon Hininger, CoreCivic’s then-CEO, told investors on a May 2025 call.

The financial gains from CoreCivic’s ICE contracts are already being realized. In the fourth quarter of 2025, CoreCivic recorded US\$604 million in revenue, a 26 percent jump compared to last year’s fourth quarter.

CoreCivic’s soaring profits, however, come from “the destruction of human lives as directed by the Trump administration and made possible by the majority Congress,” Setareh Ghandehari, advocacy director for the Detention Watch Network, a coalition that aims to end immigration detention, told the *Guardian* newspaper.

CSI Aviation

Plane spotters have long been able to track celebrities like Taylor Swift as well as clandestine U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) flights to Guantánamo Bay, for example, by monitoring their flight logs that are listed on public websites using tail numbers—identifiers for planes similar to license plates on vehicles—and air traffic call signs (a set of characters used by pilots when communicating with controllers on the ground).

But two months after Trump became president in 2025, a group of airlines on contract to CSI Aviation, started to ask flight-tracking websites to stop publishing their tail numbers. These companies also suddenly switched to using the air traffic call sign “Tyson,” which is the sign that Trump used for his personal plane during his first presidential term.

Investigations by the Project on Government Oversight (POGO) and immigration advocacy group La Resistencia quickly spotted that CSI Aviation was the air charter company hired to transport migrants for Trump’s mass deportation campaign conducted by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency.

“Nobody has usually ever heard of the[se] airlines,” Scott Keyes, founder of Going.com, a flight deals site, told *CBS MoneyWatch*, a finance news division of *CBS News*. “They are charter airlines that don’t have a set schedule on a website.”

Publicly-available flight tail numbers are vital “to be able to understand how ICE is conducting its enforcement and deportation activities,” Eunice Cho, senior counsel for the ACLU National Prison Project, an initiative committed to criminal justice reform, told *CNN* television. “Sometimes this is the only information that the public has with respect to where ICE is placing people because of a general lack of transparency around detention and deportation under this particular administration.”



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Activists were sharply critical. “Families can’t trace where their loved ones are being sent, they’re just being disappeared....If we can’t observe how human beings are being treated, we are worried human rights will be violated,” Guadalupe Gonzalez, a spokesperson for La Resistencia, told *CNN*.

“These ICE flights represent a system operating in darkness,” said Savi Arvey, director of research and analysis for refugee protection at Human Rights First, a nonprofit human rights advocacy organization, in a press release. “People are disappearing...all without transparency or due process.”

CSI Aviation

CSI Aviation is a shadowy private flight broker and medical transport services provider founded in 1979 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, by Allen Weh, a retired Marine Corps colonel. It has been awarded some US\$2.9 billion in federal contracts since 2008, largely by ICE, according to data posted by the federal government. The most recent was a no-bid contract worth up to US\$585.5 million, which went into effect in March 2025, to deport migrants.

As a broker, CSI typically sub-contracts to smaller outfits like Avelo Airlines, Eastern Air, Eastern Air Express, GEO Group, GlobalX, Kaiser, Key Lime Air, OMNI Air and World Atlantic (Caribbean Sun), according to Human Rights First.



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Trump Donations

In late October 2024, CSI hosted a presidential campaign rally for Trump, which took place at a company-owned aircraft hangar in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "They're letting millions of people come into your state," Trump told the crowd in a 90-minute speech that focused on the border. "They're ruining your state." Allen Weh together with his daughter and his wife (both of whom have served as CSI corporate directors) collectively contributed roughly US\$840,000 to Trump-aligned political action committees in the 2024 election, according to data analyzed by POGO.

Deborah Maestas, Weh's daughter, was one of several high-ranking Republican Party members in New Mexico who submitted false claims that Donald Trump won the state in the 2020 elections. Despite this, Maestas was renominated as a presidential elector in 2024. Weh was rewarded by Trump in 2020 with a seat on the Pentagon's Defense Business Board after he fired nine of the previous board members.

The company's past operations have attracted allegations of mistreatment. For example, in 2017, 92 refugees were placed in shackles for almost 48 hours on a CSI-contracted deportation flight headed for Somalia.

"The guards did not loosen the shackles, even when the deportees told them that the shackles were painful because they were too tight, that their arms and legs were swollen and were bruised," their lawyers wrote in a class action complaint that was filed with a federal court in Florida.

That same year, a plane operated by World Atlantic for CSI Aviation carrying 129 detainees from Miami to an ICE center in Louisiana was forced to land in Georgia after the cabin filled with smoke and fumes. "Passengers started to yell, telling me to open the door, but the plane was still moving," a senior flight attendant said in an incident report. "This time the smoke was getting thicker and much more visible."

Abuse Allegations

The Trump administration initially vowed to deport as many as 1 million people by the end of 2025. A total of 2,138 removal flights to 79 countries have been recorded between Trump's inauguration on January 20, 2025 and December 31, 2025, amounting to a 44 percent spike over the same time in 2024.

As the number of weekly ICE deportation flights have increased, so have tales of alleged abuse.

On January 24, 2025, a GlobalX plane flew to Brazil, carrying 88 passengers. "On the plane they didn't give us water, we were tied hands and feet, they wouldn't even let us go to the bathroom," deportee Edgar Da Silva Moura told the *AFP* news agency.

"The most difficult moment was when the air conditioning broke down in the air; people started feeling sick, some fainted, and the children were crying," Kaleb Barbosa, one of the other passengers, told *G1*, a Brazilian news website. "The engines were shutting down during the flight; it was terrifying, like something out of a movie."

"It was terrible, I was handcuffed by my arms, legs, and waist; they didn't respect us. They beat us. They said they were going to let the plane be shot down and that our government was worthless," Carlos Vinícius de Jesus, another passenger, told *G1*.

Five days later, a GlobalX aircraft carrying 40 passengers traveled to Honduras. "They brought me here in chains from last night until we arrived. We are not criminals," Dagoberto Portillo, one of the deportees said, according to *El Heraldo*, a Honduran newspaper.

Flight Attendants Blow the Whistle

Flight attendants on GlobalX planes have shared stories of how migrants were treated by ICE security guards, with *ProPublica*, an investigative journalism newsroom.

"Lala" - a former flight attendant who asked to use her nickname - explained that ICE guards prohibited the flight attendants from most regular procedures such

as speaking to the passengers, giving them food or making eye contact. The attendants were also forbidden from walking down aisles without a security guard and from sitting in aisle seats next to the passengers or wearing the company-issued scarves (in case passengers grabbed them).

"Not being able to serve them, not being able to look at them, I didn't think it was right," Lala told *ProPublica*.

Another attendant recounted an experience of attempting to give snacks on a flight filled with children. "The chaperones were like, 'Don't give them any food,'" the attendant told *ProPublica*. "And I'm like, 'Where is your humanity?'"

The flight attendants were also shocked that the passengers were chained up. "They never taught us anything regarding the immigration flights," another attendant told *ProPublica*. "They didn't tell us these people were going to be shackled, wrists to fucking ankles."

Some migrants were even placed in a full-body WRAP, a straitjacket-meets-sleeping-bag restraining device. One flight attendant described it as getting "burritoed."

Attendants say that they are not informed on what to do with the shackled prisoners in case of an emergency evacuation, despite the fact that this is one of the highest priority tasks in their job.

One flight attendant said they were often told: "If a fire occurs in the cabin, if we land on water, don't check on the immigrants. Just make sure that you and the guards and the people that work for the government get off."

Current and former employees of Avelo Airlines (which was another major CSI subcontractor until recently) have shared stories and concerns similar to GlobalX's employees.

One anonymous Avelo employee told the *American Prospect* magazine that shackled migrants have been often held onboard for hours on end when flights were delayed, forcing some passengers to relieve themselves in their seats.

A former Avelo flight attendant told *Arizona's Family* news platform that migrants on deportation flights are unable to move quickly because they are weighed down by their shackles and struggle to buckle themselves in. "Any flight attendant, any aviation professional, anybody can look at that situation and say that it's a disaster waiting to happen," he said.

Indeed, on November 13, 2025, an Avelo ICE flight carrying 88 people was forced to make a rapid emergency landing due to cabin pressure loss, leaving six people injured and experiencing nosebleeds, according to the *American Prospect*.

Piercing the Black Box

In an attempt to peel back the curtain on CSI's clandestine deportation operations, Tom Cartwright, a 72-year-old former J.P. Morgan executive turned refugee advocate, started a project to track ICE flights for Witness at the Border.

"There is no disclosure, there is no reporting, this is by design not transparent," Cartwright told the *Verge*, a technology news website. "People deserve to know what is happening."

From January 2020 to July 2025, Cartwright tracked over 40,000 ICE flights, using free aviation-tracking apps. He triangulated information from data like the company name, aircraft registration and airport to figure out if a plane was carrying migrants.

"People who needed help started reaching out to me. For example, a lawyer with a client about to be deported to Ecuador would contact me to ask when the next deportation flight to Ecuador would be so he

could make sure a family member would be there to meet him," Cartwright told *El Pais* newspaper. "By analyzing the data, I can tell him the next flight will most likely depart from this location, on this day, at this time. That's deeply gratifying. It's behind the scenes, but it makes a real difference."

"His work brings essential transparency to U.S. government actions impacting thousands of lives and stands as a powerful example of citizen-driven accountability in defense of human rights and democracy," Uzrz Zeya, CEO of Human Rights First, told the *Associated Press* news agency. (Human Rights First now operates the ICE Flight Monitor started by Cartwright.)

Cartwright is not the only person tracking CSI's charter network. A military veteran who goes by the name "JJ in DC" on Bluesky routinely tracks deportation flights. He sounded the alarm about then-CSI subcontractor, Avelo, covering its branding on its planes in all-white paint to try to keep deportations under the radar.

And volunteers at Seattle watch live video feeds on local county-operated cameras to take notes of flight tail numbers and the number of migrants embarking and disembarking from aircraft.

Company Response

When senior Democrats on the Homeland Security Committee in the U.S. Congress asked Allen Weh to provide details of CSI's activities and subcontractor network, referencing allegations of "dangerous conditions" on flights, the company deferred the questions to ICE, stating that their work was legal and "strictly operational."



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Pushing Back

Across the country, resistance to Trump's maverick actions is mounting. A tidal wave of protests is unfolding notably against Big Tech companies like Amazon, Oracle, OpenAI and Palantir as well as other Trump administration-affiliated businesses like CoreCivic, CSI Aviation, GEO Group and Energy Transfer.

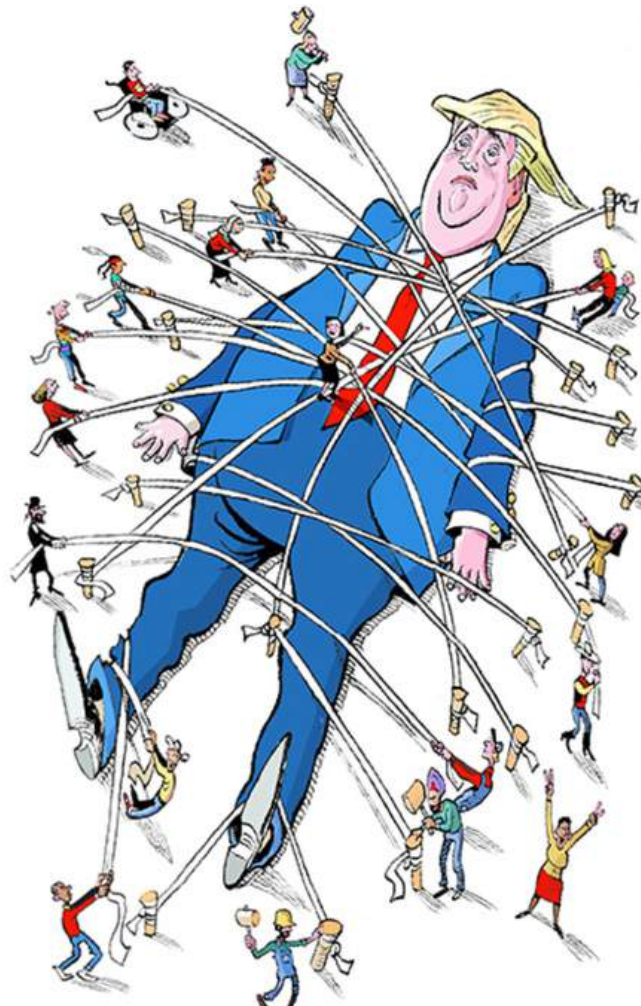
The biggest backlash has been against the data centers that are taking over swathes of rural farmland, drawing down water supplies and causing electricity prices to spike.

Opposition to Texas projects like Stargate in Abilene, Fermi in Amarillo and Highlander near San Antonio, are just the tip of the iceberg – some 48 proposed U.S. data center projects with a total value of some US\$156 billion were blocked or stalled by local opposition groups in 2025.

Almost 70 local governments have passed laws blocking new data center construction and over a dozen states are looking to do the same, according to the US Data Center Moratorium Tracker.

In December 2025, Texas activists celebrated after a prospective tenant withdrew a US\$150 million funding commitment to the proposed Fermi data center.

"This moment shows that data centers are not inevitable," said Danny Cendejas, a campaign specialist at MediaJustice in a press release. "This is a warning sign for the entire data center and AI infrastructure industry that communities will continue to fight to halt these projects. Across the country, people are organizing against data centers that increase their utilities costs, siphon their water supply and take over their land."



Since then shareholders have filed lawsuits alleging that the data center's claims for market demand were over-hyped and two top executives at Fermi have resigned.

Activism against Big Tech companies profiting off surveillance has also started to mushroom, notably against Palantir. From California (where the company was initially based) to Denver, Colorado, (where the company headquarters were moved in 2020) and Miami, Florida (where the company headquarters were moved in 2025) as well as across the country in cities like New York where protestors have displayed signs like "ICE kidnaps, Palantir profits. Let our people go" and "Palantir Powers ICE & Automates Cruelty."

The negative publicity is starting to affect Palantir's business. *Republik* newspaper and the WAV research collective in Switzerland found that Swiss government agencies had rejected Palantir contracts no less than nine times.

Similar action has been taken by the city of London (in the UK), which blocked a £50 million contract for Palantir to provide software to the Metropolitan Police for criminal investigations as well as internal culture and standards reform. The company was faulted for "clear and serious breach of the applicable procedural requirements."

A spokesperson for the city government added that the city was also looking into the broader question as to "whether a company's values and ethics should be considered during public procurement."

And now, the UK government is considering canceling Palantir's contract with the NHS after over 200,000 individuals signed a protest petition against the company.

Silicon Valley workers are also organizing a pushback against ICE. Almost 2,500 Big Tech employees from companies like Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Nvidia, OpenAI and SpaceX signed a January 2026 petition asking their employers to cut ties with ICE.

The negative publicity of doing business with ICE has caused a number of companies to reconsider. For example, Cap Gemini, a management consulting company based in Paris, France, sold off a U.S. affiliate that accepted ICE contracts to track down migrants for deportation after it faced scrutiny from the French parliament. Others like Avelo Airlines, based in Houston, Texas, announced that it would stop doing business with ICE. (Avelo sold off the planes used for deportation to Daedelus, another company which is supporting ICE's deportation operations.)

Private prison companies like CoreCivic have also faced opposition, notably to its 1,104-bed Midwest Regional Reception Center detention facility in Leavenworth, Kansas, where local residents were able to stall the company's plans for one year. The city of Leavenworth sued the company in March 2025 for failing to consult with city officials and for not allowing the city to investigate alleged sexual assaults and other violent crimes. After a series of legal roadblocks, in March 2026, CoreCivic was awarded a permit by the city of Leavenworth to operate the detention center, on condition that it agree to a city-run oversight committee, a ban on the detention of children, and to provide a minimum number of staff.

Efforts to build new detention facilities for ICE have also faced strong headwinds. The Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas fired top management of its economic development corporation after it won a US\$29.9 million federal contract to design potential ICE detention facilities. "We recognize the weight this news carries for so many, as well as the feelings of anger, confusion and disappointment it caused," the band said in a statement. "As a sovereign Nation, our values guide the decisions we make, and we acknowledge that this contract does not align with those principles."

And multiple local governments have acted to cancel real estate contracts with Newmark, a wholly owned subsidiary of Trump administration-linked firm Cantor Fitzgerald, after ICE attempted to buy empty warehouses to turn them into detention centers.

For example the Choctaw Nation shut down an attempt by ICE to buy a 1.2 million square foot warehouse in Durant, Oklahoma, and protests by residents of Oklahoma City, forced the owners of OKC Logistics Park, a million square foot warehouse, to cancel another deal with Newmark.

“The owners of the property...confirmed to me this morning that they are no longer engaged with the Department of Homeland Security about a potential acquisition or lease of this property,” said David Holt, mayor of Oklahoma city in a press statement. “I commend the owners for their decision and thank them on behalf of the people of Oklahoma City. As Mayor, I ask that every single property owner in Oklahoma City exhibit the same concern for our community in the days ahead.”

To date, perhaps the greatest people power victory against the MAGA agenda, has been in the city of Minneapolis, where local residents braved snow and ice, tear gas and bullets in early 2026, and organized to slowly but surely push ICE out of their city.

Kristi Noem, the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security at the time, was later unceremoniously fired, and Greg Bovino, the commander-at-large of the U.S. Border Patrol, was ousted from his role and forced into retirement.

"They thought they could break us, but a love for our neighbors and a resolve to endure can outlast an occupation," Jacob Frey, the mayor of the city, posted on Twitter. "These patriots of Minneapolis are showing that it's not just about resistance — standing with our neighbors is deeply American."

All That Glitters

A decade after the Make America Great Again launch, Trump threw a special event for supporters in May 2025. Those who bought the most \$TRUMP meme crypto coins were invited to join him for an exclusive dinner at his Virginia golf club. Over 200 invested some US\$191 million to attend.

Meme coins are a type of crypto investment. They started out as a joke among crypto investors to register a value to an idea (often a silly one) on the blockchain, which can then be traded and tracked. But they have no intrinsic value apart from what investors will pay for them. Donald Trump and Melania Trump launched coins just before his presidential inauguration in 2025 which soared in value immediately. Since the Trumps reserved a large quantity of the coins, they briefly held as much as US\$20 billion worth of coins on paper, some of which they quickly sold to net US\$350 million in profits.

But one year after the splashy Virginia party to celebrate Trump's embrace of cryptocurrency, the \$TRUMP meme coins crashed in value from a high of approximately US\$75 to US\$2.50 in May 2026, a 95 percent fall. Collectively investors in \$TRUMP meme coins have lost an estimated US\$3.9 billion, according to a report from Inca Digital, an industry research firm.

Meanwhile the Trump family's other crypto projects like the WLF1 token (created by the family controlled-World Liberty Financial) have also crashed in value. WLF1 traded as high as US\$0.45 in late August 2025 but lost some 80 percent of its value over the next few months to trade at about US\$0.07 in early May 2026. The Trump family has stepped in to prop up the value of the tokens and block early investors from withdrawing their money.

Justin Sun, a crypto-investor who attended the May 2025 Virginia dinner with Trump after buying US\$19 million worth of \$TRUMP and some US\$1 billion in WLF1 tokens, has sued Trump's businesses for blocking him from cashing in.

Today, like Sun, even Trump's most fervent backers – U.S. voters – are starting to get angry about their mounting losses from unabashed MAGA profiteering as food and gasoline prices soar. In early May veteran pollster Nate Silver put Trump's approval rate at minus 18.6 percent.

