

How To Track Any Political Oligarch And Their Crazy Democracy Manipulations

In the new Age Of Transparency, you can hunt down any evil tech oligarch that is toying with our Democracy

Two handy things to know, when you're reporting on an ultrawealthy individual, is whether that person owns a private jet, and where that jet has been. So last year, when an editor assigned me to report on tech billionaire and major right-wing donor [Peter Thiel](#), I set out to find his plane.

Strange! I know. But there was a point to the exercise, and it wasn't to figure out where the elites of Silicon Valley go on vacation. Thiel is worth an estimated \$2.3 billion. He has deeply held political beliefs — he is [a major skeptic of multicultural democracy](#) and a supporter of President [Donald Trump](#) — and a vast fortune he accrued by founding PayPal and investing in [Facebook](#). He has few obligations to disclose how he spends his money to realize his political vision. Over the years, reporters have discovered him using shell companies and other clandestine means to [finance a dystopian facial recognition company](#), [spread scientifically dubious ideas](#) and [influence political races](#). The true extent of his influence [remains unknown](#).

Tracing Thiel's clout, in other words, is extremely difficult. The uber-rich have endless tools to maintain such secrecy. They channel their billions with [the invisibility of deep ocean currents](#) through offshore accounts and dark money groups, leaving the public with little ability to divine how they are shaping governance, policy, public opinion and life in general for the rest of us.

But even the 1% has to deal with the DMV. (Maybe. Who knows.) And anyone who owns a plane has to register that aircraft with the Federal Aviation Administration. If you know a plane's tail number — the unique identifier the FAA assigns to every United States aircraft — you can plug it into various databases and watch the plane soar around the globe in real time. In the past, reporters have used that information to identify which masters of the universe [attended a secretive Koch brothers summit](#), and to crack open [the CIA's terrorist rendition program](#). Watching the flight path of Thiel's plane might allow me to divine which donor summits he attends, or which politicians borrow or ride his plane and generally benefit from his patronage.

In a time of global crisis — say, when a deadly coronavirus is sweeping the planet at pandemic speeds — I might even be able to see where Thiel takes cover.

That is, after all, exactly what the richest of the rich are doing. As COVID-19 spreads around the world, they're swapping their [villas for yachts](#) and [chartering private jets](#) to avoid catching the contagion from the general public. They are arranging private, VIP medical care, and a New York heiress is reportedly retreating into a "medical bunker" she built for these exact circumstances. Thiel doesn't have a bunker, exactly, but he does have a multimillion-dollar estate in New Zealand, the [preferred doomsday destination](#) for the world's wealthiest individuals. Friends of Thiel's have said they plan to escape there with him when society finally collapses.

I don't know if he's en route. But I'm pretty positive Thiel owns a jet. And I'm somewhat confident I may have found it. That jet took off Thursday night from Los Angeles International Airport en route to the Hawaiian Island of Lanai, before it was diverted to the nearby

island of Maui. On Friday, the jet reached Lanai. On Monday afternoon, it's scheduled to return to Los Angeles.

Is he shuttling friends to safety?

Did Peter Thiel just make the first leg of his escape?

A Plane, A Plan

There's no reporting that proves Thiel even owns a private jet, but the evidence is highly suggestive. In 2016, The New Yorker [reported](#) that Sam Altman, who founded the tech incubator Y-Combinator, has a doomsday plan that involves a remote secure location, Thiel and a plane: "If the pandemic does come, Altman's backup plan is to fly with his friend Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist, to Thiel's house in New Zealand."

Prepping for the end of civilization in one's own luxury bunker has become [quite trendy](#) among the rich, especially among billionaires from Silicon Valley — who, for some reason, have a particular flair for imagining an apocalyptic near-future. Beautiful, remote New Zealand is especially attractive to prepper Americans because the primary language is English.

Is this the first leg of Peter Thiel's escape?

Thiel [acquired New Zealand citizenship](#) under eyebrow-raising circumstances in 2011 (he did not meet its general residency requirements, but he sure gave New Zealand charities a lot of money) and owns a \$4.8 million estate there with [a newly constructed panic room](#). For Thiel, there is the added charm that New Zealand is where Peter Jackson filmed "The Lord of The Rings." Thiel loves "The Lord of the Rings." He's given several of his

companies cheeky names [inspired by](#) J.R.R. Tolkien's novels: Valar Ventures, Mithril Capital. Palantir Technologies, his spooky data analytics firm of which the CIA is a client, is named after a set of sinister seeing-stones.

Altman's plan to rely on Thiel to fly and house him in a time of global crisis suggests that the jet they plan to use is Thiel's. But here's a more straightforward argument: If you were worth an estimated \$2.3 billion, wouldn't you own a private jet?

A Code Name

The FAA's database of private aircraft contains tens of thousands of registrations. The primary ways to search for a specific plane are by looking up the plane's serial number, its registrant (i.e. the person or company who owns the plane), or its tail number, also known as the N-number.

But searching the registry for Thiel's name and those of his companies didn't yield any promising results.

Another journalist, who has more experience covering the rich and powerful, told me that if Thiel owned a jet, it was likely registered to a shell company set up specifically for the purpose of keeping his plane's information private. My search would be "confounded," this person said, unless I came across the name of said shell company, or if one of Thiel's dumber friends had posted a selfie with the plane's tail number in view.

Both seemed unlikely. Thiel is notoriously privacy-obsessed. After the website Gawker outed him to the general public in 2007, Thiel went on a secret annihilation campaign and [bankrolled the Hulk Hogan lawsuit](#) that bankrupted Gawker in 2016.

I was crestfallen. And then I wasn't. Like a clap of thunder, I realized I knew exactly what Thiel would name his private jet holding company. I opened up a fresh browser tab and searched "lord of the rings eagles."

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I've never read Tolkien's novels. But even I know that there are mythical giant eagles that rescue the main characters, Talmudic debates about why Frodo couldn't just ride the eagles to Mount Doom, and, given the immense volume of Tolkien lore needed to sustain these debates, names for the eagles.

According to Wikipedia, the eagle Gwaihir rescued Frodo and Sam from Mount Doom after the Battle of the Black Gate. But, and I mean no offense to the war hero, "Gwaihir" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. By contrast, Wikipedia tells me "The Lord of Eagles in the First Age, said in The Silmarillion to be the 'mightiest of all birds that have ever been,' with a wingspan of thirty fathoms (54.9 meters, or 180 feet) and a beak of gold," was named Thorondor.

I typed "Thorondor" into the FAA registry. One result was for a company that registered a four-seat Cessna in Tennessee. The other was for Thorondor LLC, which holds the registration for a top-of-the-line Gulfstream G550 business jet.

Thorondor LLC's address is listed as care of Apercen Partners, a law firm that performs tax planning and compliance services for venture capitalists, hedge funders, entrepreneurs and "high net-worth individual clients" in Palo Alto, California, the heart of Silicon Valley.

Reader, I gasped.

A Twist

For weeks after my discovery, I watched as Thorondor rocketed around the globe, and I began to log the places it had flown in the past.

As tracking planes goes, this wasn't easy. There are several websites where one can look up a plane's flight history using the tail number, but all of these returned some version of the same message when I looked up Thorondor's tail number: "This aircraft is not available for public tracking per request from the owner/operator." Classic Thiel.

In a few online forums of plane enthusiasts, however, plane watchers (and they are legion) had logged the unique call sign associated with Thorondor's tail number. Whoever had blocked the tail number on these websites had failed or forgotten to block the call sign, which became my window into Thorondor's world.

Thorondor flew to the exact destinations one would expect Thiel's plane to fly. It took constant trips between San Francisco, the tech capital of the nation, and Los Angeles, where Thiel moved in 2018. The plane took occasional jaunts to executive airports near Washington, D.C., and New York City. And several times a year, it flew from California to New Zealand, usually by way of Hawaii. In the course of my reporting, I discovered that Apercen Partners or its attorneys were also the registrants for several Thiel-linked nonprofits.

Thorondor. The Lord of Eagles in the First Age, said in The Silmarillion to be the "mightiest of all birds that have ever been," with a wingspan of thirty fathoms and a beak of gold. Wikipedia

And yet there were times when Thorondor wasn't where it should have been. On a Friday in August, when Thiel [appeared live on "Fox & Friends"](#) in New York, the plane appears to have flown from Los Angeles to Fiji. In September, when Thiel and Ann Coulter hosted [a political fundraiser](#) in Thiel's Park Avenue apartment, the plane was apparently parked in California.

Could it be that the plane I was shadowing belonged to another Silicon Valley billionaire — one with highly similar tastes in travel, fantasy novels and money managers?

It seemed unlikely. Thiel's is such a unique mind. He relishes in the subversiveness of being one of Silicon Valley's most outspoken conservatives, as when he declared that his move to Los Angeles was a bid to [escape San Francisco's liberal monoculture](#). He is also a great admirer of René Girard, a French philosopher who posits that all human behavior is based on imitation. Knowing this gives you a leg up on those who don't. "You might not be able to escape imitation entirely," [Thiel has said](#), "but if you're sensitive to the way it drives us then you're already ahead of most."

Yet no sooner did I entertain this thought — that Thiel is not so different from his fellow tech titans — than I came up with alternative theories of who owns Thorondor. Chief among them is Napster founder Sean Parker. Parker (Justin Timberlake played him in "The Social Network") has patronized Apercen Partners to administer his main philanthropic foundation, public records show. He's owned homes in San Francisco and Los Angeles and has business investments and [relationships](#) in New Zealand, including [an investment](#) with "The Lord of the Rings" director Peter Jackson.

This brings us to Parker's 2013 wedding. For his nuptials, Parker spent \$4.5 million transforming parts of Big Sur into a wooded

fantasyland. He [hired](#) "Lord of the Rings" costume designer Ngila Dickson to style the wedding party and his guests, and he offered actor Ian McKellen a reported \$1.5 million to officiate the wedding dressed as Gandalf. McKellen [declined](#), saying, "Gandalf doesn't do weddings." Parker later paid a settlement of \$2.5 million for what the California Coastal Commission claimed was potential destruction to old-growth redwood forest from all the digging, bulldozing and building of fake ruins. (The bride wore Elie Saab.)

Now there's a guy who would name his private jet holding company Thorondor LLC.

I reached out to Apercen Partners to ask who owned the jet. The firm didn't respond. I reached out to a representative for Thiel to ask if the jet was his, and got no response. I reached out to a representative for Parker with the same question and got no response.

I discovered that the jet once flew to a [secret conservative confab](#) held by the American Enterprise Institute on an island resort in Georgia. Very Thiel-y! But I searched in vain for a comprehensive copy of that year's guest list, and along the way, I learned that Parker had been a guest in [a previous year](#). I saw flights that placed Parker and the plane on different sides of the country, based on Parker's public appearances. I dug up the incorporation documents for Thorondor LLC in Delaware...."

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