

# Security firm Palantir secretly providing New Orleans police with predictive policing software

**Tom Hall****1 March 2018**

Palantir, a secretive technology contractor with ties to the Pentagon and US spy agencies, has worked with the city of New Orleans to test its dragnet surveillance software for years, according to a report published in the online magazine *The Verge*.

The agreement with Palantir, which was co-founded by Paypal founder Peter Thiel with seed money from the CIA, was reached in 2012 with the office of Democratic mayor Mitch Landrieu. However, the city's residents were totally unaware of the details of this program until *The Verge* broke the story on Tuesday.

Palantir specializes in data mining software which creates statistical models to predict what people will do before they do it, based on factors such as family and personal ties, geographical location, socioeconomic factors and social media posts. The use of such technologies stands in flagrant violation of Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable searches and seizures.

The military and intelligence agencies use such predictive models to create lists of people to be subjected to intensive surveillance or even drone assassinations. However, such software is increasingly used by police departments around the country. The Los Angeles Police Department has acknowledged that it is a customer of Palantir, as was the New York Police Department, until it cut ties with the company earlier this year in favor of alternative datamining software. Chicago's police department used such software to create a "heat list" of individuals deemed likely to either commit or be a victim of murder.

According to *The Verge*, the project began at the initiative of James Carville, the former campaign

manager and adviser to president Bill Clinton who now teaches political science at Tulane University. Carville has also been on Palantir's payroll as an adviser since at least 2011, according to the report.

Carville defended the project as essentially a philanthropic endeavor designed to rein in the city's skyrocketing murder rate. However, this is belied by the fact that the program was carried out in near-total secrecy. The agreement was kept off of the city's books and away from public scrutiny by funneling it through Landrieu's charitable foundation, NOLA for Life. "No one in New Orleans even knows about this, to my knowledge," Carville said. According to *The Verge*, "Mayor Landrieu's office, the city attorney, and the NOPD appear to be the only entities aware of the firm's work in the city. Key members of the city council were not aware of Palantir's work in New Orleans until approached by *The Verge*."

For Palantir, the agreement with New Orleans represented an opportunity to test products that it could sell to other police departments and intelligence agencies. *The Verge* report notes that the company was able to sell products tested in New Orleans to the Danish national police and intelligence services and to the security services in Israel. The company also sought unsuccessfully to sell its services to the Chicago Police Department, which ultimately decided to use different software.

Carville and his wife Mary Matalin openly bragged of his role in bringing Palantir executives into contact with the New Orleans local government in a radio interview in 2014. "We're kind of a prototype," Matalin, who is also a well-connected political consultant, but for Republicans, said. "Unless you're

the cousin of some drug dealer that went bad, you're going to be okay." As *The Verge* correctly commented, this amounts to a back-handed admission that the surveillance algorithm could "sweep up innocent people" based on their mere association with people convicted of crimes.

"The data on individuals came from information scraped from social media as well as NOPD criminal databases for ballistics, gangs, probation and parole information, jailhouse phone calls, calls for service, the central case management system (i.e., every case NOPD had on record), and the department's repository of field interview cards," according to *The Verge*. These "field interview cards," it added, "[represent] every documented encounter NOPD has with citizens, even those that don't result in arrests," and come from a policy which "resembled NYPD's 'stop and frisk' program and was instituted with the express purpose of gathering as much intelligence on New Orleanians as possible, regardless of whether or not they committed a crime."

The fact that the Landrieu administration effectively handed over the city to Palantir to test advanced spying technologies is of a piece with government policy since Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The ruling class seized on the devastation made possible by its decades of underfunding for hurricane preparedness to convert the city into a testbed for various reactionary, pro-business measures, most notably the conversion of the city's entire public school system into privately-operated charter schools.

The revelation of Palantir's agreement with the city of New Orleans further demonstrates the increasingly close integration between local police forces and the military-intelligence apparatus.

Since this program began, the Pentagon has funneled billions of dollars in surplus military hardware, including armored vehicles, to local police departments, which were then arrayed against peaceful protesters in Ferguson in 2014 and Baltimore the following year. The exposure in 2015 of the Chicago Police Department's "black site" at Homan square, where detectives disappeared and tortured suspects, represents the domestic application of the methods perfected by American imperialism in a decade and a half of the so-called "War on Terror."

Under the guise of combatting the spread of "fake

news," the ruling class is utilizing predictive modeling software such as that marketed by Palantir to police the Internet and transform it into an instrument of surveillance and control. Last month, Facebook announced it would be implementing such technology to censor "harmful" content. "Our goal with AI is to understand the meaning of all the content on Facebook," CEO Mark Zuckerberg declared in a statement.



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