
The Final Act Is Conquest: Tech Billionaires, Political Mythmaking, and The Hero's Journey from New Money to Absolute Power

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Résumé

Les milliardaires de la Silicon Valley, en particulier des figures comme Elon Musk et Peter Thiel, ont dépassé leur rôle d'entrepreneurs pour devenir des acteurs politiques et des architectes de nouvelles structures de pouvoir. Ce travail explore la manière dont les mythologies culturelles du « New Money » — marquées par l'individualisme, la conquête et le rejet des contraintes démocratiques — présentent ces figures comme des protagonistes de parcours héroïques auto-mythifiés. En s'appuyant sur la théorie du mythe idéologique de Roland Barthes et le modèle dramaturgique de la présentation de soi d'Erving Goffman, l'analyse examine comment ces milliardaires cultivent leur influence à travers le spectacle médiatique, le branding personnel et le contrôle du récit. À travers les cas de Musk, Thiel et de l'ancien président Donald Trump, ce travail retrace l'évolution de l'éthos politique de la Silicon Valley, passée du lobbying en coulisses à des tentatives explicites de gouvernance autoritaire. S'appuyant sur des enquêtes journalistiques et des cadres théoriques, il soutient que ces figures n'opèrent pas comme un mouvement politique unifié, mais comme des protagonistes rivaux en compétition au sein de mythes qui se chevauchent. En fin de compte, l'analyse affirme que comprendre ces mises en scène est essentiel pour résister à leur consolidation du pouvoir — et que dévoiler ces récits constitue la première étape pour se réapproprier la réalité.

Mots-clés: Silicon Valley, nouveaux riches, mythes culturels, autoritarisme, démocratie.

Abstract

Silicon Valley billionaires, particularly figures like Elon Musk and Peter Thiel, have ascended beyond their roles as entrepreneurs to become political actors and architects of new power structures. This paper explores how the cultural mythologies of New Money—marked by individualism, conquest, and a rejection of democratic constraints—frame these figures as protagonists in self-mythologized hero's journeys. Using Roland Barthes' theory of ideological myth and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of self-presentation, the paper examines how billionaires cultivate influence through media spectacle, personal branding, and narrative control. Through the cases of Musk, Thiel, and former President Donald Trump, it traces how Silicon Valley's political ethos has evolved from behind-the-scenes lobbying to overt attempts at authoritarian governance. Drawing on investigative reporting and theoretical frameworks, it argues that these figures operate not as a unified political movement but as rival protagonists competing within overlapping myths. Ultimately, the paper contends that understanding these performances is crucial to resisting their consolidation of power—and that exposing the narrative is the first step to reclaiming reality.

Keywords: Silicon Valley, new money, cultural myths, authoritarianism, democracy

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Introduction

The Silicon Valley tech establishment has long sold itself as a land of meritocracy, genius, and innovation—the ultimate realization of the American dream. Its key players are mythologized in Americana as lone visionaries who, by ‘moving fast and breaking things’, usher humanity into a utopian future. Cultural myths are not merely fairy tales; they are ideological tools that frame man-made power structures as natural (Barthes, 1957). By casting themselves in the roles of the hero in our modern cultural myths, entrepreneurs have long positioned their innovative visions as a journey, the products they invent as tools to save mankind, and government regulations as obstacles in the way of their destiny. This ‘founders-as-gods’ world-view has been present in the words and actions of billionaires across the political spectrum for decades. In 2013, Google’s then-CEO Eric Schmidt—a prominent Democrat—visited Myanmar, a country just emerging from military dictatorship. With the dramatic, sincere confidence of a science-fiction hero back from the future, he declared, “the Internet will make it impossible to go back,” and advised the government to “try to keep the government out of regulating the Internet” (Reuters, 2013). Schmidt’s vision, a common one across Silicon Valley, was that technological products and internet telecommunications would not only modernize Myanmar, but would civilize its people—and conveniently make Google shareholders very happy. This techno-deterministic assumption, that founders are benevolent heroes bringing

their special tools to a community in order to save them, has long shaped Silicon

Valley’s ambitions, reinforcing its leaders’ pursuit of unregulated influence.

More recently, this mythology has taken a darker turn. Silicon Valley CEOs, venture capitalists, and billionaire inventors have begun openly sharing authoritarian views and donating millions of dollars to political campaigns, including that of the re-elected President Donald Trump (Hernandes et al., 2024). Elon Musk has, for example, amplified beliefs on X (formerly known as Twitter) that only “alpha males” should have the right to vote (Laws, 2024), while billionaire Peter Thiel has openly stated that “[he] no longer believe[s] that freedom and democracy are compatible” (Thiel, 2009, para. 2). This paper examines the actions of these three billionaires who have moved from boardrooms to war rooms: Musk, Thiel, and Trump. Their ascent is framed as a performance—an epic play in which Barthes’ (1957) theory of ideological myth reveals the narrative scaffolding, Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical model exposes the personas they perform, and the ethos of New Money provides the script. These three self-styled protagonists—whose rivalry and mutual disdain are well-documented—have nonetheless found themselves united by a shared antagonist: democracy. In a world where the stagecraft is the statecraft, this paper concludes by tracing the logic of unregulated influence to its final act: conquest. By connecting cultural mythology, political performance, and authoritarian ambition, it offers a framework for understanding the consequences of

elite narrative control for public policy, democratic resilience, and international order.

The Script

Humans are natural storytellers. This is the way that we have shared knowledge, history, and culture with each other since we first gained speech (Goody, 2006). Of all the stories we have told across civilizations and time, one of the most deeply resonant, and thus most enduring has been that of the hero's journey. It is an archetypal template that begins with a main character who is a little different, and thus misunderstood by their community. A moment happens when they leave their home behind to cross the threshold from the ordinary world into a new, special one. Along their journey, they overcome obstacles, acquire special tools, and ultimately learn that the things that made them different are the gifts that make them special. Many times, the story arc ends with the hero returning to their community and saving the day. Crews et al. (2022) describe the hero's journey as being "about survival, and it starts with the survival of the human race itself" (2022, p. 46). This narrative is so simple and feels so natural, that it is interwoven with our culture to the point of myth.

Mythologies, as Barthes (1957) argued, do not simply tell stories; they naturalize ideology. They make power appear self-evident, unquestionable, bypassing the need for justification and instead presenting dominance as fact. Silicon Valley's cultural myth, rooted in the broader ethos of American entrepreneurialism, is that of the

misunderstood visionary: a founder who, by sheer intellect and willpower, proves the doubters wrong by ascending from rags to riches. It is a myth that reinforces the worldview that success comes from breaking rules, the 'move fast and break things' operational style. Many successful entrepreneurs tell childhood stories of early rule-breaking as a way to illustrate how they were always ahead of their time. For instance, "[o]f the six people who started PayPal, four had built bombs in high school" (Thiel, 2014, p. 128) — rarely do these heroes stop moving long enough to look back at what or who may have broken. In this New Money worldview, business success becomes proof of inherent superiority (Chafkin & Fisher, 2024). These self-made men see themselves not merely as industry leaders, but as prophetic figures—whose innovations justify their authority, and whose critics only affirm their brilliance. Thiel (2009) captured this mythos when he wrote: "[t]he fate of our world may depend on the effort of a single person who builds or propagates the machinery of freedom that makes the world safe for capitalism" (para. 13). In this narrative, a founder's triumph in the marketplace is framed not merely as economic success but as validation of personal brilliance and ideological authority. Once capitalist success is accepted as evidence of superior judgment, the leap from influencing markets to shaping political systems begins to appear not only natural, but necessary.

Wealth that once exerted influence through campaign donations and lobbying has become a direct pipeline to power. United States Vice President JD Vance

exemplifies this trajectory: a protégé of Thiel, hand-selected out of Yale Law School, mentored as a venture capitalist, before being funded by Silicon Valley to transition into politics, ultimately culminating in his crowning as Trump’s vice president. Vance’s New Money origin story illustrates how the more destructive sides of Silicon Valley’s political ethos have migrated from boardrooms to war rooms. Using “technologies built in Silicon Valley and public relations tactics invented on Madison Avenue long ago meshed with dictatorial behavior” (Applebaum, 2024, p. 146), Vance’s ascent reveals a new innovation: tech founders no longer just bankroll candidates—they can engineer them. And in order to get their money’s worth, they need “people like Elon Musk in charge of a federal government who are responsive to people like Elon Musk” (Klein & Swisher, 2025, 42:55).

The Actors

The cultural myths of Silicon Valley have long conditioned the public to tolerate, even romanticize, the eccentricities of lone genius inventors in exchange for reaping the rewards of their business success. As Elon Musk once described himself on *Saturday Night Live*: “Look, I know I sometimes say or post strange things, but that’s just how my brain works! To anyone I’ve offended, I just want to say: I reinvented electric cars and I’m sending people to Mars in a rocket ship. Did you think I was going to be a chill, normal dude?” (2021, 1:54). Kara Swisher, a tech journalist who has covered Silicon Valley since the 90s, both describes Musk as archetypal: “Silicon Valley has a million

people like him. He was very typical,” and as someone who always needed to be at the centre of the drama. “Someone described him to me as Ready Player One and everyone else is an NPC, which is a non-player character. He always has to be the hero, or the person who matters the most.” (Klein & Swisher, 2025, 4:00).

Goffman (1956) theorized that all human social interactions are fundamentally performative. His dramaturgical model, outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, argues that individuals construct a curated ‘onstage’ persona for public view while concealing contradictions and vulnerabilities in the ‘backstage’. As Haugerud (2012) notes, the political effectiveness and media appeal of billionaires increasingly hinge on their ability to maintain this public performance. While not a tech founder himself, Donald Trump remains the most vivid contemporary example of Goffman’s dramaturgical model in action. As a New Money real estate developer who long resented his family’s exclusion from Old Money New York society, Trump instinctively understood the mechanics of the attention economy, where media spectacle substitutes for substance and cultural visibility functions as currency. His business ventures often blurred the line between branding and governance, but it was his 2016 presidential campaign—initially launched as a publicity stunt—that broke the fourth wall of democracy, permanently turning stagecraft into statecraft.

While historian Timothy Snyder does not explicitly reference Goffman, his remarks on Trump align closely with the

dramaturgical model of self-presentation. Snyder (2024) observes:

The first thing to understand about Mr. Trump is that he does inhabit a completely different mental world, and he inhabits it naturally and he inhabits it gracefully. He lives in a world of fiction. [...] He's never been a successful businessman, but he has played a successful businessman on television. He understands not the rules of reality, but the rules of fiction. So for him, there's no such thing as lying because there's no such thing as the truth. We're all just in this story together (0:01).

Snyder's (2024) description of Trump as a character who thrives in fiction rather than reality closely reflects Goffman's (1956) distinction between 'onstage' and 'backstage' behavior. Trump does not operate within the constraints of governance or verifiable truth, but within the arc of a story. Each of the men profiled in this paper sees himself as the protagonist of a grand narrative. Trump's story stars Trump; Musk's stars Musk; Thiel's stars Thiel. In these overlapping hero's journeys, others appear not as collaborators but as background characters, useful tools, or obstacles in the way. What emerges is not a unified political movement but a series of crossover episodes—each with its own character motivations, its own plotline, and its own endgame. Silicon Valley billionaires operate within a parallel performative paradigm. Just as Trump leveraged media spectacle into

political capital, tech founders now use digital platforms to extend their influence beyond the bounds of traditional democratic systems. Within this narrative framework, the audience gets pulled into the story whether they want to or not—as irrelevant extras at best, or as antagonists at worst. "They don't care. They don't care for you. They don't think about you. You are nothing" (Klein & Swisher, 2025, 46:00). When every move can be justified as 'for the plot,' the performative nature of power begins to erode the institutional safeguards of democratic governance. Cultural myths become not just a means of communication, but a buffer against consequence.

New Money culture holds that art is the domain of the political left, and politics the domain of the political right. In other words, if Steve Jobs treated business as an expression of art, Peter Thiel treats business as a form of activism (Chafkin, 2021). These contrasting philosophies reflect a broader shift in how power is framed and pursued, particularly when performance itself becomes ideology. Goffman's (1956) dramaturgical model anticipates this slippage. He cautions that the deeper an individual commits to performance, the more tenuous the distinction between stage and self becomes: "To the degree that the individual maintains a show before others that he himself does not believe, he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self and a special kind of wariness of others" (Goffman, 1956, p. 214). Even Thiel (2014), in reflecting on the trajectories of founders, notes that "the cycle usually

starts with unusual people and ends with them acting and seeming even more unusual” (p. 131). This observation, taken in context, suggests how performance and identity may converge to the point of indistinguishability. As mythmaking accelerates and self-image becomes entwined with public narrative, the persona risks eclipsing the person, until the act becomes the only thing left standing.

The Playbook

New Money culture is built on one-upmanship. Among billionaires, status is not measured by wealth alone, but by visibility, influence, and ideological reach. Increasingly, billionaires turned celebrities have come to see ideology as both a branding strategy and an investment vehicle—“understanding that ideology can be a valuable way to make money, and money can advance an ideology” (Chafkin & Fisher, 2024, 19:50). Historically, purchasing a struggling newspaper was a way for tycoons to project sophistication and cultural capital (Grossman et al., 2022). Today, however, the stakes are far higher. By extending their control to social media platforms, as Elon Musk has done with X, these individuals wield unprecedented influence over public discourse (Chafkin. & Fisher, 2024), with profound consequences.

Thiel made his bets early—moving into Trump Tower after the 2016 election to assist in selecting members of the incoming administration—but it is Musk who has most fully embraced the performative potential of power. Though the two men reportedly cannot stand each other, both viewed Trump as a useful vehicle for their own ambitions (Klein & Swisher, 2025).

Their mutual disdain only underscores the competitive nature of New Money mythmaking, where even the heroes are rivals. By merging the roles of celebrity, executive, and shadow statesman, Musk represents a new convergence of media spectacle and political ambition—with few precedents and even fewer constraints. These New Money media moguls have now become part of what Applebaum (2024) describes as “Autocracy, Inc.” — a global constellation of political actors who use wealth, narrative control, and digital infrastructure to undermine democratic norms. When Musk purchased Twitter, fellow billionaire Mark Cuban explained the logic through the lens of New Money ambition: Owning a global communication platform gave Musk more influence than heading any traditional corporation. This was not just a U.S. move — it was a power play on the world stage (Klein & Swisher, 2025, 52:30). These figures are not merely amplifying their voices; they are rewriting the infrastructure of political debate. They determine what ideas surface, which voices are heard, and which are silenced by algorithms. As Snyder (2024) warns, Trump’s strategy was never about truth, but about flooding the public sphere with so much fiction that all narratives collapse into noise. Once people distrust every institution, power belongs to whoever holds the loudest megaphone. Thiel’s “in-house philosopher” Curtis Yarvin envisions a future in which Trump returns to the presidency not as a governing leader but as a ceremonial figurehead — a chairman of the board — while real power is transferred to an unelected executive behind the scenes. The swearing-in, Yarvin (2022)

writes, “obviously has to be televised,” signaling the start of a new regime (para. 22). Yet even amid this accumulation of power, one fear remains constant. For all their money, followers, and narrative control, these men cannot escape the final constraint: death. Like millennia of emperors, kings, and strongmen before them, they chase legacy through accumulation, spectacle, and reinvention.

Offstage

The hero’s tragedy for New Money is that the character compulsions that take someone to the top—ambition, energy, workaholicism—are the same ones that make it difficult, if not impossible, to relax when they get there. There is always more to do, more to earn, and more to be. They will never be satisfied, to the point where they have lost all sense of proportion (Hedges & Sacco, 2012). The last founder’s paradox is that all the money in the world cannot buy them more time. This is why they are so afraid of death (Heffernan, 2021). “Although we humans have not conquered death, we have invented an immortal creature: the corporation” (Bostrom & Schneider, 2016, p. 255). However successful these billionaires may be at circumventing taxes, death remains the one inevitability they cannot outmaneuver. This fear drives their need for legacy—whether through building business empires, colonial empires, putting men on Mars, or the literal pursuit of immortality through artificial intelligence and biotech investments, of which they believe that “providing this gift to humanity will provide glory to those who deliver it,” described BBC technology reporter and

psychologist Aleks Krotoski (Richardson, 2023, para. 9). Thiel (2009) argues that genuine freedom can no longer be attained through political means alone, but must be pursued beyond existing systems—through an untested process of departure toward uncharted territory, a kind of undiscovered country where a new order might be established (para. 8). It is as if they can feel the walls of their own mythology are closing in, and they must escape.

To them, attaining political power is not the happy ending to their story, but their desperate effort to escape it to save themselves. Perhaps they believe that if they move fast enough and break enough things, the cycle of “creative destruction” (Thiel, 2009, para. 6) will grant them the chance to build something new and glorious from the wreckage. This marks a stark departure from democratic governance, replacing systems of collective accountability with unregulated corporate rule where wealth alone justifies authority. It reflects a worldview long embraced by autocratic strongmen, now repurposed for Silicon Valley’s mythmakers. What today’s strongmen have, in turn, appropriated from today’s showmen, is their lack of shame. Whereas twentieth century dictators could be incentivised to behave themselves according to democratic norms through foreign pressure campaigns, “[t]oday, the members of Autocracy, Inc., no longer care if they or their countries are criticized or by whom. Some, like the leaders of Myanmar and Zimbabwe, don’t stand for anything beyond self-enrichment and the desire to remain in power, and so can’t be embarrassed” (Applebaum, 2024, p. 6).

This is where the billionaire class—once content to manipulate politics from the sidelines—has fully converged with authoritarian rulers. Both groups have learned that to wield ultimate power, one must abandon the trappings of respectability, shed any remaining restraint around greed, and embrace the possibility of being deeply, publicly hated (Klein & Swisher, 2025, 37:00). As Heffernan (2021) wrote in her review of *The Contrarian*, “scared people are scary,” and Chafkin’s portrait of Thiel’s “galactic fear — of liberals, of the U.S. government, of death — turns Thiel himself into a threat” (para. 28). “I used to tell myself that Thiel is just another rapacious solipsist,” she continues, “but I used to tell myself that about another rapacious solipsist, and he became president” (Heffernan, 2021, para. 28). Little do they care to heed the prophecy of New Money, that the gifts that made them will be the same gifts that destroy them; it is that those who seek immortality through conquest often leave behind only ruins (Hedges & Sacco, 2012).

Conclusion: The Grand Finale

Polanyi (1944), in *The Great Transformation*, argued that unfettered markets inevitably lead to social and political catastrophe. When deregulated capitalism exhausts resources, exploits workers, and creates mass instability, elites historically do not respond with reform—they respond with conquest. Writing about fascism, Paxton (1998) posited that “the circumstances of war, and particularly of victorious wars of conquest, give it the fullest means of expression” (p. 21).

Though they stop short of explicitly embracing authoritarian labels, the actions of the kleptocrats of Silicon Valley appear to be willing to follow in their footsteps if it means getting what they want, “just carrying to its logical end point a viewpoint which has been pretty common in Silicon Valley since at least the early 90s” (Chafkin & Fisher, 2024, 24:56). Every law, ethical principle, and democratic norm is merely an obstacle to overcome in their self-mythologized hero’s journey. This endless accumulation is not just economic but political, as elites pivot from market control to inner circle political influence, solidifying a system where the public will is rendered irrelevant. “The corporate state knows only one word: *more*.” (Hedges & Sacco, 2012, p. xii). If they crash the economy, start wars, or dismantle democracy, they will never be the ones to suffer the consequences; only the unimportant non-player characters will.

As Trump, one fictional hero, surrounded by members of Silicon Valley New Money, who each also believe themselves to be fictional heroes, openly discusses invading Canada, Greenland, and Panama (Davies & Wendling, 2025), we are watching this process unfold in real time. But what happens when there is nothing left to conquer? Czech writer and former president Václav Havel once compared authoritarians’ blind pursuit of power to the Spanish conquistadors’ doomed quest for El Dorado, warning that a life of materialistic obsession without responsibility ultimately leads to nothing but hollowed immortality (Bostrom & Schneider, 2016). These billionaires are not the visionaries of a futurist utopia for the human

race; they are the last stage of corporate conquest, racing against time to consolidate as much power as possible before the collapse they helped engineer arrives.

If the myths are designed to make power structures seem inevitable and natural (Barthes, 1957), what happens when there is a plot twist—brought about by underestimated individuals, long dismissed as background characters, who refuse to keep playing along? “If nothing else, the [Ukrainians fighting back against the Russian full-scale invasion] showed us that nations are not pieces in a game of risk”

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(Applebaum, 2024, p. 175). Myths only have power as long as people believe them. The story of the heroic New Money geniuses of Silicon Valley can be interrupted. In an era where public relations, brand strategy, and media influence determine political power, we must recognize that these elites are not just business figures—they are strategic mythmakers, constructing narratives that justify their dominance. If Barthes and Goffman offer one spoiler, it is this: exposing the act is the first step towards breaking the fourth wall and reclaiming reality.

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