In Defense of Europe

A Letter from the Chief
Executive Officer

March 10, 2022

The facts of history have always been inconvenient for those whose convictions about its purported arc are strongest.

It is now clear that the fantasy of an enduring and perpetual peace in Europe was premature at best.

A desire for coherence in the beliefs one holds is often so strong that important and dissonant features of the world are dismissed in favor of a pre-existing conception of the way things ought to be.

But the conflation by those in power of *is* and *ought* —the blending of descriptive and normative accounts of the world—persists at the center of the current crisis. The mere belief, however fervent, that nations should settle their disagreements through discourse does little to constrain a country's use of violence to advance its political aims.

The war in eastern Europe stems from a collective suspension of disbelief by those whose overconfidence in recent decades in the raw power of their ideals enabled the balance of power in Europe to shift.

We have collectively been so certain for so long that history has ended, that the world's most significant moral questions have essentially been resolved, that we continue to confront the unraveling of history with some degree of quiet shock.

A lack of genuine interest in shifts in national ambitions and capabilities can be fatal to those who would rather impose their view of the appropriate arc of history onto history's disjointed path than investigate its complexity.

These views of history, about its rhythms and seeming contradictions, have informed the ways our company has organized itself for the purpose of constructing software and the specific software products that we have chosen to build.

When we founded our company, it was broadly assumed that the only way to effectively combat terrorism was to build software platforms that would assist the state in gathering every shred of information and evidence about its citizens without any concern for their rights. We rejected this assumption from the start.

Our business has grown over the years precisely because we refused to build what the market thought it wanted and make real the misguided fantasy of an omniscient state. The access controls, security and privacy protections, and constraints on use that we build into our software platforms—that is, the limitations on the power of such software as well as its fortifications against misuse—are what preserve our collective freedom.

But Europe and its allies must not forget that the relationship between the vulgar power of a state—its credible threat of effective violence to extend the operation of politics by other means—and the ability of that state to advance its views on individual liberty or the appropriate limitations on state surveillance, for example, are inextricably linked. The privilege to engage in defending the individual against state power is made possible by state power itself.

The absurdity of discussing the appropriate limitations on state or corporate power in the digital age without having a means to defend oneself often seems most apparent to outsiders or those who have been persecuted consistently over time. The need for raw forms of power, technological or

otherwise, is often lost on those who have enjoyed it for too long.

The successful construction and defense of a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence ("*das Monopol legitimer physischer Gewaltsamkeit*") is not only what defines the state, as Max Weber made clear, but makes the state's continued survival possible.

The soft power and cultural influence that many in Europe and the United States had hoped would someday make militaries obsolete has failed spectacularly to stem the aspirations of autocratic rule.

The fantasy of an instinctively peaceful world may be comforting. But it is again coming to an end.

Europe has for the past two decades stood on the sidelines of the digital revolution, whose principal participants are still essentially all based in the United States. The unrelenting innovation and disruption from American firms has reshaped industries and extinguished others.

But the founding spark for Silicon Valley was its embrace of the defense objectives and technological aims of the government whose very existence made its rise possible. The intersection of technical engineering talent, the protection and relative insulation of academia, and the government's aggressive search for truly disruptive technology to advance its defense and intelligence objectives gave rise to the Silicon Valley that we know today.

Our expansion as a company over the years was made possible by our work with government agencies in the military and intelligence sectors in the United States, whose leaders took an interest in software and understood its potential to reshape national defense. Software as much as anything else is a product of the legal and moral order from which it stems and plays a role in defending it.

The need for Europe to become a leader in disruptive defense technology is clear. The

continent certainly understands that its defense and that of its allies now requires the development of an indigenous source of strength and capacity to defend itself, and quickly.

But for Europe to do this will require more than additional funding and a momentary pause in the familiar and ordinary political disputes of a continent still very much in the process of negotiating the terms of a shared identity and future.

An embrace of the relationship between technology and the state, between disruptive companies that seek to dislodge the grip of entrenched contractors and the federal government ministries with funding, will be required for Europe and its allies to remain strong enough to defeat the threat of foreign occupation.

Our software is in the fight around the world. The center will hold.

But we need an allied technology industry in Europe to step up and fight this battle alongside us in order to win.

Alexander C. Karp

Chief Executive Officer & Co-Founder

Palantir Technologies Inc.