DEALBOOK SUMMIT 2026 · TALK 4 OF 12

# Palmer Luckey on War 2.0

Palmer Luckey, founder of Anduril Industries · 51 min · **Watch the video →**

> Transcript by Myles Marino. Transcribed by machine from the public video, then cleaned up: timestamps and filler removed, speakers labeled, misheard names fixed. The wording is otherwise as spoken. **[inaudible]** marks audio that could not be recovered. Check the video before you quote anything that matters. All twelve talks: mylesmarino.com/posts/dealbook-2026.

**ANNOUNCER:** Please welcome Andrew Ross Sorkin and his guest, founder of Anduril Industries, Palmer Luckey.

Good afternoon, everybody. I hope you had a great lunch. I am joined right now by Palmer Luckey. Palmer Luckey is just 33 years old. Dropped out of college to launch Oculus, the virtual reality company. He sold it to Facebook back in 2014 for $2 billion. He was 21 years old then. Three years later, Facebook fired him. We'll talk about that. He then started a weapons company named for the sword in the Lord of the Rings, and that company is called Anduril. It's now valued at $90 billion. And since his fall, he's co-led Project Meridian. That's the Pentagon's 120-day study of the future of war, alongside Elon Musk and [inaudible]. And he reports to Pete Hegseth on that. He's also, as of this year, a banker. And the bank is named after the Lonely Mountain in the Hobbit, the one full of gold. It opened in February. And he's building other things.

**LUCKEY:** I have to correct you. The Lonely Mountain existed after the Hobbit. In the Hobbit, they were dealing with the fact that a dragon stole all the gold.

**SORKIN:** Is the bank called Erebor, by the way?

**LUCKEY:** I've had to be very clear. They're like, why would you name your bank after a mountain where a dragon came and stole everyone's gold? I say, no, no, no. We're the post-dragon Erebor. The dwarves retook the Lonely Mountain. They kept it secure for about 300 years. It's unclear what happened after those 300 years. But if I can do 300 years of safety, then I'll be doing pretty good.

**SORKIN:** Okay, I'm just going to finish the introduction. Because he's doing some extraordinary other things, including trying to make an American-made laptop, he's working on genetically engineered military working dogs. And just as a side project, he happens to own two submarines, a Black Hawk and a 1985 Humvee. And he also keeps the world's largest video game collection. I understand it to be 200 feet underground in a decommissioned Air Force base.

**LUCKEY:** Missile base.

**SORKIN:** Missile base, correct. Unbelievable. Please welcome Palmer Luckey.

We're going to talk about war and the future of war. But as it happened, we were talking backstage about what might be a cyber war that seems to be going on around us. We're talking about J.D. Vance, obviously, deciding he needed to be in Washington, where they're continuing to have meetings all day about these outages. And I said to you, how much should we be worried about this? And you said, it depends on how well-prepared you are.

**LUCKEY:** Look, all the 4chan schizo posters are like 12 hours ahead of the mainstream media on this. You guys are going to find out what's going on soon enough.

**SORKIN:** What do you think is happening?

**LUCKEY:** By the way, PlayStation now has an outage. I know you're a gamer. We're seeing the natural effects of a lot of these advanced AI tools, allowing for the creation of various exploits. Some of them for strategic reasons. Many of them for purely financial reasons. There are a lot of organizations, particularly in North Korea, that are using this mismatch between new attack capabilities and our defense capabilities to obtain financial advantage. In the long run, the advantages are going to accrue to the side that is most effectively using AI for defense. The people who say that everything can be hacked, they are right for now. But as of right now, there's a mismatch between the attackers, who are very fast moving and using technology, and old outdated systems that are not able to adopt technology as quickly as it is developed. And I think people are going to have to pick up the pace. It's time to start running.

**SORKIN:** What does that mean? Are you a prepper?

**LUCKEY:** I own a missile base 200 feet underground. By the way, I'll note, it's a funny joke, but a missile base is actually a pretty bad way to run from the apocalypse. Everyone knows exactly where you are, and they're designed to take a hit from a nuclear weapon, a blast overpressure event. But I'll just tell you a secret. You can go to Home Depot, buy a Sawzall, and cut the hinges off the door in about 10 minutes. A lot of people think missile bases are secure. They're not secure. They're just really, really robust.

So the point is, everyone should have three days of water. Everyone should have three days of dry food. If you have prescription medication, don't go refill it when you run out. Make sure you refill it 72 hours before you run out. The United States is very resilient if you think on a timeline of what we can do to get everything running again over the course of three days. There are a lot of things we cannot get going again in 10 hours, 12 hours, 24 hours. People used to be taught this in middle school, and now everyone who remembers that is treated like a nut.

Cheers.

**SORKIN:** Do you print out your bank statements?

**LUCKEY:** Do I print out my bank statements? No, I do not.

**SORKIN:** Someone told me that I should. That's why I was curious.

**LUCKEY:** Oh, that's interesting. I mean, if the system falls apart to that extent, we're in for a really bad time. I think my fishing rod will be more useful than your bank statements if things are that bad.

**SORKIN:** Well, let me talk to you about your role with the U.S. government in terms of Project Meridian, and also so many of the different weapons that you're selling the government. One of the things that I don't know if most people know about you is that you may be responsible, at least as one individual, for the reason that the Trump administration changed the name of the Defense Department to the Department of War. That was something you'd been talking about with them for years.

**LUCKEY:** I'm happy to take a little bit of credit. We were talking a little bit backstage about the fact that this idea comes up in op-eds every 10 years or so. They were talking about it during Bush. They were talking about it during Obama. They were talking about it during the Cold War, when everyone was feeling like we need to get back to the name that we had won wars with instead of the one that we had kept losing them with. So I was not the first person. It's true, I pushed on this with Trump. I pushed on this with the incoming administration during the transition period. But there were other people who were pushing. I will give myself more credit than anyone else. I'm happy to do that.

**SORKIN:** Why did you want to do that?

**LUCKEY:** There's a bunch of reasons. Right when we were talking, I pulled up my notes for my meeting with Howard Lutnick when he was running the transition. So I actually have the contemporaneous notes.

**SORKIN:** You can take them out.

**LUCKEY:** Oh, sure. There we go. Okay, so there are a few things. Number one, and these are not ranked by importance. They're just ranked by what I wrote down. The first one is, from a deterrence perspective, if you want peace, you prepare for war. Nobody says, if you want peace, prepare for defense. I think it is good to have a name that people across the world clearly understand the purpose of.

Two, I think it's just way more transparent and honest. It should be focused on preventing wars and, if need be, winning wars. And I think there's been a lot of obfuscation about what the Department of Defense is, and it makes it so much easier for people to spend endlessly on it. How much money is too much money to spend on defending yourself? No amount, right? If you're very clear, no, no, this is our war fighting capability, it's a lot easier to make the trade between hospital and war, school and war, versus hospital and defense. As a libertarian who generally leans towards wanting to be fiscally responsible, I think the transparency is another one.

Another one is clarity of purpose. In any business, you need to have clarity of purpose, clarity of mission. If you try to do everything, you will accomplish nothing. And I think that is a good idea for the Department. There were so many things that were barely tangential to the war fighting capability,

around economics and international relations and climate change. Not from a war fighting perspective, but just from a general infrastructure perspective.

And then the last two are kind of tied together. From a morale perspective, look, the Department of Defense lost every war, and the Department of War won every war. Now, the War Department, rather. I think there's something to say about getting back to when things were good.

And the final one is that it's a repellent. People talk about how important it is to get the right people to come to your company or your organization. But more important than attracting the right people is repelling the wrong people, so they don't become poisoned in your organization. I think there are a lot of people who, with no change in the activities of the organization, with no change in its mission, as determined by Congress, would be thrilled to work for a Department of Defense and totally unhappy working for a Department of War. I think you need somebody who is willing to work under either of those names to be the stable foundation of our war fighting capability. And the people who freaked out about the name and left illustrate my point perfectly.

**SORKIN:** Okay, but let me ask you then a different question. You talked about winning wars. What do you think about how this administration has prosecuted the war in Iran? The President has suggested that either he has won or that it's over or something. But I don't think anybody genuinely believes that. And there are other people, and I'm going to read you this. Richard Moore, who ran MI6, he's worried that people like Xi Jinping are watching the results of both the war in Ukraine, where I know you have operations, and Iran very carefully. And he says that he believes that if Beijing decides the U.S. doesn't have the will to see Putin or the Iranian regime toppled, that this is going to lead him down the path, potentially, of miscalculating or calculating around something like Taiwan.

**LUCKEY:** Look, I agree. When we win, and we win in the strongest way possible, that is the best deterrence we can have to countries like China. I do think that, luckily, China, looking at Iran, they're probably not seeing the best that we've ever pulled off in terms of outcomes. I do think they look at things like Venezuela and realize a lot of the equipment that they sold to protect Venezuela did not work. So I think we have some losses. We have some wins lately with those guys.

Here's the good news. As of right now, Xi Jinping just fired all of his top generals. He completely purged his military. He's going to have to get his act back together before he's able to take any action. I think probably we are very lucky that he did that before we moved on Iran. Because you could imagine a world where he would look at what's going on. He'd look at our magazine stockpiles. He'd look at our current political situation. And he'd say, you know, I'll fire those guys later. I've got something to do tomorrow.

**SORKIN:** What do you think of, talking about our stockpiles? One of the big concerns is that we don't actually have enough stockpiles. Well, you heard what President Trump said. There's no problem. We can fight a war indefinitely. And what do you say?

**LUCKEY:** What I would say is that's exactly the right thing for the President of the United States to be saying, from a global perspective. Look, there are very different jobs for everybody. Specialization of labor is fantastic. It's what allows society to work. It means I don't have to make my clothes and grow my food and crank the generator for my light bulb. What it means is my job is to make sure that our magazines are full, that we have all of the weapons that we need, that we're able to have the defensive and offensive tools that we need to prevent and win wars. The job of the President of the United States might be to help enable that in some ways. But at the end of the day, he's also trying to keep people from attacking us, from attacking our allies.

And there are some people who kind of lionize truth as the ultimate thing. They don't realize that a lot of the prosperity that we have is because people took liberties with it. I mean, Nixon's madman theory, this idea that you're going to plant stories that made them think that he was not only willing to push the button, but excited to push the button. That had a good strategic deterrent effect. And so I find it hard to get worked up when people say, oh, my God, people in government are saying these things that are not strictly the way a perfectly objective observer would describe them. Pick any president, and I'll show you a few things like that.

**SORKIN:** Let me ask you a question about this president, because you've been a longtime supporter of his, I think that's fair to say. And one of your slogans is rebooting the arsenal of democracy.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** Do you think he is trying to reboot the arsenal of democracy?

**LUCKEY:** I mean, some of these long-term weapon buys are the largest we've ever seen. They've been investing in a lot of things around mass-producible weapons, lower-cost weapons, allowing more companies to compete, so that you don't have one or two companies building systems that we desperately need and that they have proven over the course of decades they cannot deliver. And we're not talking about a few months behind. We're talking about years to decades. But no, when I say the arsenal of democracy, I'm talking about refilling that arsenal.

**SORKIN:** I get that. They've done a lot to... But I'm asking about the democracy part, which is to say...

**LUCKEY:** I've got to be honest. I actually hate the arsenal of democracy term. I just have to play along with it because there are a lot of smart people who have used it. We're a republic, not a democracy. And there is a bit of a difference.

**SORKIN:** Sorry, I interrupted you. I wanted to ask you, you have people in Ukraine. You have operations there.

**LUCKEY:** I've been there personally.

**SORKIN:** You've seen some of the comments that this president has made about Putin. And there have been questions about which side of this he really supports. This gets to the idea of what it means to support a democracy and how you, especially given the seat you're in, think about that.

**LUCKEY:** Look, I think about it, but these decisions should be made by our republic, not by mega-corporate executives. When people say, oh, Palmer, what country would you sell to, or wouldn't sell to, who should we be selling to, who should we not, at the end of the day, nobody should want corporate executives to have any meaningful control of our foreign policy or military policy. I'm a dog on a chain, and I need to be kept that way. I think that's true for all of the people in my shoes.

Look, I fully support Ukraine, and I've probably been way more on the side of Ukraine than most Republicans. I've sparred with them in public, on stage, on X, and in other venues. I don't really buy into this idea that you can really question which side of it Trump is on. Trump was put into an impossible position. Remember that Trump, in his first term, was publicly calling out specific European nations and saying, you are too dependent on Russian oil. You should not approve this pipeline. It is going to put you in a position where you cannot say no to them, and you're going to regret that. And what did they do? You may remember, they literally laughed at him. The whole UN laughing at Trump saying this. He's been calling out these exact problems for a long time. And it's worth noting that since the start of the Ukraine war, Germany has sent more money to Russia than to Ukraine. I mean, you can have all these reasons why they need the oil, they need the gas, they're all going to freeze in the winter. By the way, they're not going to freeze in the winter. The thermostats are up a degree in the winter, according to the smart thermostat data, since the start of the war. So they can't even wear a sweater to save Europe.

I find it really hard for people to point at Trump and say, is he really on the side of democracy? I think he's stuck with a Europe that has not prepared. He's stuck with an America that... I mean, I tried to sell stuff to Ukraine way before this war started. I first met Zelensky shortly after he was elected, actually right here in New York City when he was coming to the UN for the first time. And the U.S. State Department position was that Ukraine was a corrupt shithole that we should not allow to engage in saber-rattling with Russia. Not my assessment. That's what you had people in government saying. I remember that. And then we flip, and people say, Palmer, why don't you support Ukraine, the shining beacon? Isn't Trump doing everything wrong? My point is, one, Trump was put in an impossible situation. He now has to manage that. And the last thing I'll say is, if people think that the right way to influence Trump is for people like me to throw him under the bus and say, yeah, what a fucking idiot, they have not been watching how anything works for the last 10 years.

Sorry for rambling there.

**SORKIN:** No, no, no. Let me ask you a different question that relates, though, to what you said at the top of this soliloquy of sorts.

**LUCKEY:** I've got it all pinned up.

**SORKIN:** You made an observation that corporations shouldn't be the ones making decisions.

**LUCKEY:** Absolutely.

**SORKIN:** The Republic should be the ones making decisions.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** So we're going to talk to Elon Musk a little bit later today. And one of the great controversies of this moment, as it relates to Ukraine, as it happens, is about his decision to slow down or not, depending on what you believe has happened here, Starlink or Starshield or some version of both. What do you think of that scenario?

**LUCKEY:** So, first of all, I like Elon. I personally like the guy. So take it with a pound of salt. I think that when the Republic needs to be in charge of these decisions, what that means is there are decisions that they need to make, and there are others that they do leave up to companies. Who America sells weapons to? That's not up to me. I'll go to prison if I make that decision for myself. To what level a company is willing to put their civilian infrastructure at risk for another country's benefit, that is a question that is often not controlled by the government, at least not as of right now.

Let me give you a steelman on this.

**SORKIN:** A steelman is different than a strongman.

**LUCKEY:** I agree. Look, I'll give you the strongest possible argument. Russia says, I am going to destroy the Starlink constellation if you allow it to be used for offensive military activity against my country. You cannot claim it's civilian infrastructure when you are explicitly allowing them, with knowledge, to use it in this way. And the satellites, because they orbit the whole planet, the same ones that orbit the U.S. are the ones that are orbiting Ukraine, right, because they're going in circles. So imagine this. Russia wipes out the constellation with electronic attack, kinetic attack, cyber effects, however they do it. They say, hey, we're going to do this. And from an international law perspective, we are absolutely justified. Nobody can claim that we are attacking civilian infrastructure. We're attacking military infrastructure.

And should Elon have to say, well, okay, I will allow it to keep being used for offensive military action, and you can just destroy my entire global constellation because that's fighting for democracy? That's what I think people don't realize, the position that he's in. It can be a decision between those two things. Do I stand up for democracy, and then, by the way, ruin a lot of U.S. war fighting capability that depends on those same satellites? Or do you say, you know what, I am going to take this region and limit the speeds that we're offering. People are saying, oh, but there are defensive systems that use this. Yes, I'm fully aware of that. Some of my systems use those exact same links. But there are offensive weapons in Ukraine being used to attack Russia using civilian Starlink satellites. So that is the steelman. And I've not heard a very good argument for why Elon should sacrifice the existence of the entire Starlink network to prove a point about defending democracy, particularly given that it's not America. If it were America, I would...

**SORKIN:** Isn't that always going to be the risk, though? Meaning for any company that's going to have a network, especially in space, the second you have that network in space, and depending on how it's being used, it becomes a military target.

**LUCKEY:** It is not automatic. There are different degrees to which this is the case. For example, this is the constant debate over whether a civilian bridge counts as a valid military target. Does a power plant count? What fraction of the power goes to military use? Are there other options? So it's not quite as simple as, if it's used in any way for military, it becomes a valid military target. It's a matter of degrees.

But in this case, look, if the United States were telling SpaceX, you need to do this, I think they then have an obligation to help defend the constellation and also probably go to Russia and say, hey, you do that, we're going to glass you, or some other terrible thing that you really don't want to happen. I don't think it's reasonable for the government to basically outsource that responsibility to a corporate executive and say, hey, we're not going to tell you that you have to do this, but we will be really angry if you don't do this thing that will get your whole constellation destroyed. It seems untenable to me.

**SORKIN:** Let me ask you a separate question, because it has to do with A...

**LUCKEY:** Actually, one last thing I should point out. There are two networks. There's Starlink and Starshield. Starshield is owned and operated by the Department of Defense with assistance from SpaceX. To be very clear, the United States could give Ukraine access to the Starshield network and allow them to run all of their weapons off that. And that is a military target. That's how it's supposed to be. But guess what? The government doesn't want to give Ukraine access. You know why? Because they know that then Russia will blow up Starshield and the U.S. military won't have it. I can't believe I didn't make this point at the beginning. The U.S. government isn't even willing to stand up for Ukraine because they're afraid of losing their constellation. Why should Elon have to lose the civilian network when the government of his own country is unwilling to put anything at risk for the same?

And this gets to a bigger problem, which is that nobody in the West actually wants Ukraine to win. They just want them to not lose for as long as possible, which is a bizarre and absurd war fighting position. But I'm not in charge. I don't get to make these decisions. And if you think you like my opinion on this one, wait till you find out my other opinions, and you'll be right back to being glad I'm not making these decisions for the country.

**SORKIN:** I'm going to get to a couple of those opinions in a moment. I have one related opinion which has to do with AI, particularly actually Anthropic. And we talked about this. I think when I saw you in March, the Pentagon was naming Anthropic a supply chain risk at the time. And they then, by the way, took on OpenAI right after that.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** And I wonder whether you think, given everything we now know about AI, whether any of these models actually are controllable by a human or by the government?

**LUCKEY:** Are they controllable? I mean, you can just look at this empirically. No. Every major model has been jailbroken to some degree in a matter of months. So anyone who says that the models can be controlled isn't paying attention to what's actually going on. It's really a question of, can the good guys

stay ahead of the bad uses of AI? I'm more afraid of really bad, evil people with pretty good AI than superintelligence that's going to wipe us all out. But no, these models, it is not clear that anyone can control them at a model-use level.

Now, I'm not worried about them running amok and running out of control. You can turn off data centers. You can shut off networks. At least as of right now, AI has no meaningful physical arms into the world to affect it. Skynet may be online, but it doesn't have access to useful tools because we haven't built useful tools. Now, people will point to, well, what about when there are a billion humanoids walking around? What about this and that and the other? Yeah, that's a different world.

**SORKIN:** What does this mean, therefore, to you? One of the things that you are doing is building autonomous weapons.

**LUCKEY:** Yes, right.

**SORKIN:** That probably scares the hell out of a lot of people when you think about what that means, because it also means that AI is playing a role, I imagine, in how they're being targeted and how they're going to work.

**LUCKEY:** This is a long, complicated discussion, but let me put my priors on the table. I was an AI guy before any of these AI guys, right? Anduril Industries. The acronym is AI. That was over 10 years ago. That was back when AI was not cool. It was not hip. You could not raise money for it. Everyone treated it like virtual reality or fusion, as something that was always in the future, never in the present. So I'm an AI OG by some definition.

With that said, the kind of artificial intelligence you use for weapons is very different from these large language models, which are general purpose, superintelligence-oriented models that are trying to do everything that anyone might want to do. People have said things like, well, Palmer, I asked AI to cheat on my homework and it hallucinated this source and I got an F. What happens when your AI does the same thing for a missile? I promise you, the AI that is taking in radar feeds, thermal imagery feeds, and analyzing the electromagnetic emanations of a Chinese destroyer, you cannot accidentally say, oh, I'm sorry, you're right, that wasn't a warship. It's a completely different set of technologies that is, by the way, a lot more reliable than the older analog fire control and seeker systems that were doing things like, look for the hottest thing in this area and go at it. I am way more afraid of the civilian collateral side for dumb weapons than I am for smart weapons. If I were just putting ChatGPT in the head of my missile, you would be right to be terrified. But the types of autonomy...

**SORKIN:** You asked about targeting, though.

**LUCKEY:** Yeah, that's a totally valid one. People have definitely used LLMs for targeting purposes and made mistakes. I don't do that. There are other companies that are doing that. I won't name names, because I'm going to just stick in my little lane and be nice.

But the real question in my mind is to ask, was it a net good? In other words, even if it made mistakes, were there fewer civilians who died than would have died otherwise? Was the mission objective accomplished faster and with less loss of infrastructure than would have been otherwise? This is the self-driving car problem, right? You're probably familiar. Nobody wants self-driving cars to be a little bit better than a person. They want them to be 100 times better. And that's what people are demanding of the military. My realpolitik take on this is that life and death at scale is too morally fraught an area to not bring your absolute best tool to the table, even if it makes people feel icky, even if it feels yucky. Because I don't think there's any right number of people to die for not feeling yucky.

**SORKIN:** What are you telling Pete Hegseth in this 120-day period about the approach that this government should be taking to war that's different than it is today?

**LUCKEY:** So to be clear, Project Meridian, we're supposed to look at what war is likely to look like in 2050. A lot of people say, oh, they're recruiting these people, what expertise do they really have in defense production? Well, I build billions of dollars in weapons. I'm doing pretty well there. My personal opinion is they're recruiting us just as much from almost a science fiction perspective. The idea is to look unconstrained by what's possible today, at what warfare will look like decades from now, and what investments we might need to make now to get there in the future. It's being run by the MITRE Corporation, which is a quasi-government organization that does a lot of these think tank policy-type analyses.

Look, the things that we're working on are things... Actually, I just came from a Project Meridian meeting yesterday at Cheyenne Mountain. So I will tell you what the high-level topic was. It was deciding which of these things we're going to be focusing on in the report. And the winning point, I think, was that we need to focus on the things that do not have existing champions. There are a lot of things, people are like, oh, Project Meridian, they're just going to tell them to buy more killer robots. No, everyone already knows we need more killer robots. Every secretary, every senator. If our report comes out and says, guess what, the current zeitgeist, that is where it's at, it's a waste of time. We need to find the ideas that do not have champions and focus our efforts on those things.

I probably shouldn't get too far ahead of it, but some of the examples of things we're looking at are weather control. How do you make sure that weather conditions are favorable to military operations and not obscuring your view of the enemy? Can you change where precipitation falls out in the ocean so that you have a better view of your targets and can make better decisions? There's no champion for weather control in the department right now. I know because I've looked, and there's no office of weather control. There are guys who make non-skid paint so you don't trip when it rains. That's about as close to weather control as the department currently gets.

**SORKIN:** I have a hard question for you. I think it's a distinctly hard question. I wonder how you think about it, and I know you think about these things. You obviously chose to be on this project with the government.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** He chose you. And I want to read you something and just get your response. This is Wes Bryant, a retired Air Force master sergeant who until last year worked on the Pentagon's assessment of civilian harm. And he said this about Meridian: "This is entirely indicative of the decay and oligarchy that's taken over our government, and in many cases directly through purchasing influence and power and authority, blatantly right in front of us. They're not even trying to hide it anymore." The connection, the closeness between you and the other defense companies and the government, is just too much.

**LUCKEY:** Look, I respect his service, and he's coming at it from a reasonable perspective. Let me put out my perspective.

**SORKIN:** Please.

**LUCKEY:** If the President of the United States or the Secretary of War says, I need... By the way, there are over 20 people on Project Meridian. I get a lot of attention and Elon gets a lot of attention, but there are 20 people on it. Including, by the way, former members of the military, very respected generals and admirals. So it's not like this is just a bunch of tech bros in charge. If you are asked to help your country, you are going to say yes.

I think it's reasonable for people to question what I'm saying and take it with a pinch of salt. Hey, Palmer makes weapons, maybe we should keep that bias in mind. But I'm going to be totally honest, and this might sound really, really mean to you. You would never be asking this question of Eric Schmidt when he was on the Defense Innovation Board under Biden, right? He was working on defense. We wrote about it. But would you, in this limited time on stage, say, let me read this quote about this guy who says you are indicative of the decay of our nation at a fundamental level? Of course not. You would never say that. And he would say the same thing. Joe Biden asked me to be on the Defense Innovation Board, and I joined. Before that, you had the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

My point is, if it is a problem, it is an old problem. It has been around since World War II. Presidents and secretaries have formed board after board after board to ask people in industry, including people in the defense industry, what do you think we should be paying attention to? And of course, they take it with a pound of salt. They know these guys have a stake in it. It doesn't mean you need to shove them in another room and never talk to them. That'd be crazy. So I've read attacks like that, and my feeling is it's very, very partisan. I didn't attack Eric Schmidt for being on the Defense Innovation Board. I don't think anyone should. And you know what? I bet if you were asked to be on a President's Council of Advisors on Journalism by Hillary Clinton, I doubt you'd be like, oh my God, doesn't she know that I am a journalist? This is indicative of the moral decay of our nation. We're running lockstep towards hell.

The point is to take it with a pound of salt and read our report, which, by the way, is going to be public. This is going to be a public report. Read it, look at it. And when we're done, you can decide if we've destroyed the country.

**SORKIN:** One of the things that I know, and I very much appreciate that answer, and I think everybody here does. One of the things I know that you are focused on or have wanted to do is that you believe that we should bring back testing of nuclear weapons.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** Which is something that I think also scares the hell out of a lot of people.

**LUCKEY:** See, I told you, you guys aren't going to like everything I have to say.

**SORKIN:** So I wanted you to explain that, if you could.

**LUCKEY:** There are a lot of reasons. Some of them are way less developed, and I'm not an expert on them. I have this working theory in my mind that mutually assured destruction relies on a certain level of psychic belief in the power of nuclear weapons at a population level. We know that MAD works as a deterrent strategy when everyone is afraid of nuclear weapons. We do not have any evidence that it works when people are not. And when you show that you're not even willing to test things, I think that robs mutually assured destruction as a concept of a lot of credibility. I have to admit, I'm not a philosopher, nor am I a tactician, nor a strategist.

There's actually a much more boring reason that I want to restart nuclear testing.

**SORKIN:** What's that?

**LUCKEY:** We need to test not the weapon itself, but the impact of nuclear weapons on the technology that underpins our military and our society, lest we accidentally make the use of nuclear weapons an impossibly irresistible use of force. I'll give you an example. In the 60s, the 70s, the 80s, the early 90s, we weren't just blowing up nukes to watch what they did. At almost every test, we were lining up rows of civilian pickup trucks, military radios, washing machines, respirators, ventilators, everything you need to run hospitals, power plants, substations, oil refineries. And we were watching not just what the blast and temperature effects had on them, but also the electronic effects. What is an electromagnetic pulse? A broadband electromagnetic pulse, not something like a directed energy microwave weapon, but a broadband massive pulse. What does that do? Which things survive? Which shut down but are able to be restarted? Which of them are completely fried and will never operate again?

We learned a lot from that, and we spent a lot of money hardening military infrastructure and critical infrastructure and power supply and hospital infrastructure. There's a lot of stuff in hospitals, you may or may not know this, that was designed to survive an airburst nuke above the United States going off and trying to wipe out our grid and everything else. The problem is that we've not run those tests in decades. The models that we use to simulate the effects of nuclear weapons on electronics were for transistors that were literally thousands of times larger than the ones in this phone. We don't actually know what will happen to our phones, to our critical infrastructure, to our military.

And imagine this. If I'm an enemy power, imagine if I could make an entire region of U.S. forces non-mission capable, but without killing them. What if I could do a nuclear airburst and all their radios stop working, all their equipment stops working, all this modern tech, all these autonomous weapons that we're building were not sufficiently hardened against those effects? I mean, that's pretty tempting, because killing thousands of Americans is going to trigger either an actual strategic exchange or a massive conventional war. Does anyone really believe...

By the way, this may not be as obvious as "I nuked it on purpose." I'll paint a picture for you. China decides that they're going to test a nuclear weapon in space, not on the ground. Oh, no, the yield was larger than we expected, and the side lobes hit the whole Korean peninsula at the same time, coincidentally, and surely with no warning. South Korea is invaded by North Korea, deciding to use their conventional weapons, which were not affected, their massive artillery all in the mountains, to take advantage of this situation. And the U.S. can't do anything about it, and neither can South Korea, because they bought all of America's weapons.

All of that possibility space is downstream of us not testing in any way the impacts of nuclear weapons on modern technology and electronics. That is why I'm an advocate. I am not confident my stuff can survive, even when I follow the rules and the rad-hardening guidelines that, again, were designed for ancient technology. They were designed for the type of cell phone that Abraham Lincoln would have used.

**SORKIN:** I've got three very quick questions, because I know we're going to be out of time. One of which is an opinion that I think may also surprise people in this room. We were talking about the death penalty recently, and obviously there was potentially going to be a televised death, and you came out and said this was the right thing to do.

**LUCKEY:** Absolutely.

**SORKIN:** Why?

**LUCKEY:** This is not actually a Palmer Luckey special. This is a pretty popular libertarian opinion, which is that the state should very rarely, if ever, engage in capital punishment. It should be the ultimate punishment, and it should not be something that is medicalized and hidden away and trivialized. People that the state executes should not be killed by having a doctor who swore to protect life give someone a shot, like they're giving him his annual flu checkup, and then have him peacefully pass away. Executions should be brutal. They should be violent. They should be enacted by the people we give a monopoly on violence to, which is our law enforcement and military apparatus. And people should respond either in horror because it was the wrong target, it was the wrong person, someone that they don't think deserved to be blown to pieces, organs all over a wall, or they should say, yeah, that guy had it coming. And I think that the medicalization and the hiding of the death penalty...

**SORKIN:** It's a deterrent in your mind.

**LUCKEY:** Part of it is a deterrent. That is part of why I support the death penalty in some cases. But I'm talking about a deterrent against the government running amok and out of control. The thing that controls overuse of the death penalty is transparency into the practice. That's why I said broadcast. That is why I'm a fan of public executions. If the government is going to kill somebody, they need to be willing to put them out in public and say, this is a guy we are killing, and it is the right thing. And by the way, you know what got rid of the death penalty in the United States, in a lot of states? It was states that were doing public executions of people who most people did not agree should be killed. That is supposed to be the control.

**SORKIN:** Do you see the same thing in the context of war?

**LUCKEY:** In the context of war? You mean, should it be public? Should it be broadcast?

**SORKIN:** Should it be everywhere?

**LUCKEY:** Oh, the Vietnam question.

**SORKIN:** Should we be seeing all of it? If the view is we should be seeing the capital punishment, should we be seeing, in real time even, what's happening in war?

**LUCKEY:** I'm going to admit, I have not thought about this very deeply. I'm aware that this became a debate largely during Vietnam, when we gained the capability to do real-time television broadcast of war. It's very clear that the anti-war movement was hugely empowered by the broadcast of what was going on in Vietnam. So if you believe that the Department of War and our government apparatus should be accountable to the populace, the people who vote for our elected leaders, yeah, probably a good... I mean, here's a hypothetical. How would Vietnam have gone if we didn't have any information from it? What if the only information we had was government propaganda telling us what was happening and how great it was? Probably would have been a different response. And then I would say flip to the Gulf War. I think that was a case where it being out in the open and in public made it really clear, like, oh yeah, this is definitely a good one. So I would say, yeah, probably. I would be on the side of, yeah, you should have more transparency into these things. The more that you rely on the government propaganda pipeline as your only source of truth, whether it's for war or who deserves to die, the bigger of a problem that is.

A lot of people are like, oh, Palmer just wants to kill people because he wants bread and circuses. He just wants to bring back the Roman Colosseum. You know, he wants them to be eaten by lions. And like, no, no, the point is I want control on the power of government. And I believe the only way to do that is to get people worked up when appropriate about the power of government.

**SORKIN:** Okay, two final questions. One of the things you want to do, though, to effectively get away from government, is create data centers. Interestingly, Elon wants to do it in space. You want to do it in the ocean.

**LUCKEY:** No, no, that is one very small bit, and it is somewhat accurate. I talked about this yesterday. People hadn't heard about it before. I've been working on building these floating platforms that you can use for the things that need to get done in America, but for a variety of reasons, primarily due to state and local government regulations and pushback, people don't want happening in their backyard. Things like metal ore processing and chemical engineering and oil refining and desalination, right? California needs water, but they don't want desalination plants along the coast. My thinking is you can take a lot of these things that America desperately needs, that people in an abstract way do want to exist. They just don't want it where they are. And the problem is that everyone is in the places where they need to be, so you do them offshore.

Now, there's been some reporting that says, oh my gosh, Palmer is working on floating AI data centers. To which I'd say, no, no, I've been working on this for like 10 years. I am not some Johnny-come-lately hype chaser jumping on the latest trend. I'll be perfectly fine if AI data centers come and go and there's no more. I actually do lean towards thinking most AI is going to run locally. I think the chips are going to get way more powerful. I think people are going to want to control their own data. I am actually somewhat skeptical of the mass-scale data center as the way AI proliferates pitch.

Anyway, I think data centers are one of the things where people want the output of it. People want to be able to go on YouTube. They want to be able to use Instagram. They want to be able to cheat on their homework with ChatGPT. They just don't want big screaming data centers in their particular neck of the woods. And I think there are ways that we can just take all that stuff and shove it out in the ocean.

**SORKIN:** Real quick, just talking about data centers in space.

**LUCKEY:** Me and the space people are two sides of the same coin. We just agree it can't be done right over there.

**SORKIN:** I was going to ask you about Jensen, because I saw a comment that you made, which is you think this is China winning.

**LUCKEY:** That's right.

**SORKIN:** What do you mean by that?

**LUCKEY:** What I said is that China wants Jensen out, so I want him in. And to be clear, I don't actually agree with Jensen on very material ideas that he has about what the U.S. relationship should be with the Chinese economy. Like, I don't think that we should be exporting chips to China. He thinks there is an argument. I think these are reasonable arguments. There are other smart people I know, including in the administration, who agree with them. I just happen to not be quite on their side.

There are a lot of people who hear that, and it's like the midwit take. They say, but Palmer, NVIDIA is the one that was helping China, so you're an idiot. What they don't understand is China doesn't want NVIDIA to sell GPUs to Chinese companies. There are Chinese companies that want to buy NVIDIA GPUs. There are 600,000 H200 GPUs sitting in a port right now because China will not give them an

import permit, because they want to build an internal domestic processor industry, silicon industry, not build one that is dependent on the United States. And so the point that I've made is, China is thrilled to have Jensen out, who is somebody who was pro-selling into China.

**SORKIN:** But Jensen was helping smuggle into China.

**LUCKEY:** Yes, against the Chinese government's will. The bizarre thing that people don't get is Jensen was basically on the side of Chinese AI companies, but not the Chinese government. And so they're thrilled to have Jensen out, and they know this also. There's a reason it's knocking a trillion dollars off NVIDIA's market cap. They know that it makes America weaker to knock him out. And I'm sure this CFO lady, they put her in as interim CEO, is a perfectly wonderful woman, but she is not Jensen. She is not going to lead them into a period of prosperity that persists for a millennium. It's just, she's not quite the right person. Jensen is the guy who built this company from scratch. He deeply understands it. His personal relationships are the reason that everyone is willing to do business, because paper means nothing. Paper gives you the right to sue somebody after you think they screwed you. That doesn't actually solve problems. A piece of paper that says I can sue the guy who screwed me, it doesn't actually solve the issue. Nobody can take Jensen's place at this critical juncture. And so again, China wants him out, therefore I want him in. But he shouldn't have slept with whatever she turns out to be.

**SORKIN:** Final question for you, because I know I think you still hold it inside, but maybe not. How happy are you or sad that you got fired from Facebook in the end, given everything that's just happened?

**LUCKEY:** I was going to joke and say I'm not someone who keeps it inside, but this is more on the inside side. Look, my general moral philosophy is that people should be judged on their actions in the context of those actions, not with the benefit of hindsight. So if I shoot you in the head and I'm hauled off stage, but you recover and miraculously develop psionic powers, does that mean that it was okay that I shot you? Now, people could ask you, well, aren't you glad you got shot? You now have the power to lift entire buildings with your mind. And you'd probably have conflicted feelings. You'd be like, well, that is very good. I'm doing a lot of good for the world. Probably on net, it worked out better for everybody. But I still shot you, and you would probably still hold it against me, unless you're a really, really forgiving guy. And I'm not a forgiving guy.

There are a lot of people who really screwed me over, and they stabbed me in the back in a way that was very painful, very personal. For people who don't know, I gave $9,000 to a pro-Trump group during the 2016 election. And then I was put on leave and then I was fired. And in case anyone tries to say it was about X, Y, or Z, no, it was not. I had excellent performance reviews. My most recent review was "greatly exceeded expectations."

**SORKIN:** You still remember this.

**LUCKEY:** I still remember my performance review from H1 2016, yes. But the point is, people say, well, Palmer, isn't your company more important? Aren't you doing more for the country? Aren't you refilling the arsenal of democracy? Wouldn't that never have happened had you stayed making virtual

reality toys for 10-to-14-year-old boys primarily? And that's true. But I still take it very personally, especially from the people I made hundreds of millions of dollars. I basically made them. I started Oculus when I was 19 years old. I was living in a camper trailer. These are people I'd worked with since the very beginning. And they decided that I was a millstone around their neck and they cut it loose. So it's probably better for everybody that I got fired, but I have not let it go.

**SORKIN:** And you re-partnered with Mark Zuckerberg.

**LUCKEY:** This is where it gets complicated. So just so people know, Anduril took over a program that had been struggling for a number of years, building infantry vision augmentation systems for soldiers that display incoming threats, show them where the safe areas are, give them much better thermal vision, night vision, so that they can see what's going on in smoke, in clouds, at night. And it's true. I teamed up with Mark Zuckerberg. We are back together. There's a picture. We're like, we're like this.

**SORKIN:** I don't know, as a journalist, whether I'm supposed to do this.

**LUCKEY:** Yeah, see. There you go.

So people are like, Palmer, what the heck are you doing? The reality is, Mark Zuckerberg is not the one who fired me. He runs this massive organization. I was like an update on his daily brief. Oh, by the way, the people who run this division in your company, that's a couple thousand people, they decided that Palmer Luckey needs to be terminated. Oh, wow, really? Oh yeah. There's no way out of it. All of the executives say they're going to quit if you make them work with him.

**SORKIN:** Is this a Trump thing?

**LUCKEY:** Okay. Like, the reality is, there are people who are like, oh, but shouldn't he have stood up for you? No, man. He's running a multi-hundred-billion-dollar company. His job is not to countermand the signal he gets from his deputies one, two, three levels down. Imagine if that's what he did. I tried to do that, and it's really, really difficult. So the people who screwed me over are not Mark Zuckerberg. You know how many times I had met Mark Zuckerberg? Like a dozen. I worked with his lieutenants all the time. Who cares? The guys who screwed me over are the people I had hundreds of meals with, even in the middle of the night, eating crappy Korean food while we jammed to try and get stuff done for CES, the Consumer Electronics Show. The guys who are worth tens or hundreds of millions of dollars because I bet on them, I put them in a position, I protected them as the Facebook politics tried to replace their jobs. Those are the people that I love.

Mark is not quite a god, but you kind of have to almost act as if he is. He's a force of nature. He exists outside of the universe of what Oculus was at the time. And so if I can make a deal with Mark that says that all the tech I sold him can be used to help the U.S. Army, and that all of the IP that I sold him can be licensed into that, and that all the tech they've built on top of what I sold them can also help our troops stay alive, I am going to make that deal. I am not that mean of a guy that I could say, well, this could save a lot of soldiers, but Mark Zuckerberg, he really should have stood up for me. I can't do it. Sometimes you have to do the right thing.

**SORKIN:** Palmer Luckey, everybody. Thank you.

**LUCKEY:** Thanks, guys.

**SORKIN:** Thank you for this.