From Apartheid to MAGA

By Frank , 25 April 2026

From Apartheid to MAGA: The South African Roots of Four Influential Trump Allies

The political coalition that backs Donald Trump draws from many streams – economic populism, conservative Christianity, and anti-establishment libertarianism. But a less discussed tributary runs through 1970s and 1980s southern Africa. Four prominent white men in or around the Trump movement spent their formative years under apartheid: Elon Musk, Peter Thiel, David Sacks, and Paul Furber. Their shared background, some observers argue, has influenced a distinctly libertarian, race-conscious, and anti-government strain of American conservatism.



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The Four Figures

• Elon Musk, now the world's richest person and a vocal Trump supporter, grew up in Pretoria during apartheid and emigrated in 1988 at age 17. He has since warned of a "genocide of white people in South Africa" – a claim with no factual basis.

• Peter Thiel, co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, spent part of his childhood in South Africa and Namibia. His father worked on a uranium mining project in Swakopmund, part of the apartheid regime's broader industrial and military ambitions.

• David Sacks, a venture capitalist and Trump fundraiser, left South Africa at age five and was raised in Tennessee. He has been a prominent critic of US aid to Ukraine and a defender of Trump's rhetoric.

• Paul Furber, a software developer living near Johannesburg, was identified in

2022 by two independent forensic linguistics teams as the original author of the early QAnon posts, which helped catalyse the conspiracy movement that later merged with Trump's MAGA base.

Three Themes from the Apartheid Era

1. Extreme inequality as "natural" Under apartheid, white South Africans enjoyed disproportionate wealth and comfort while Black workers lived in cramped camps. Some white residents internalised this not as a political system but as a reflection of inherent differences in capability. Max Chafkin's biography of Thiel, The Contrarian, notes that Thiel's father's mine had luxurious facilities for white managers and "conditions not far removed from indentured servitude" for Black labourers. Two former Stanford classmates have alleged that Thiel said apartheid "works" and was "economically sound" – a claim his spokesperson has denied.

2. Fear of racial violence By the 1980s, many white South Africans lived in dread of a Black uprising or massacre. Musk has described seeing murders on trains as a teenager (though the accuracy of those memories is uncertain). In 2023, he claimed on X that South African leaders were "openly pushing for a genocide of white people" – an unsubstantiated allegation. This fear, according to some analysts, parallels Trump's vivid and false depictions of immigrants as violent predators, e.g., "American girls being raped and sodomised and murdered by savage criminal aliens."

3. Contempt for government Both the apartheid regime and its successor, the African National Congress, failed to deliver reliable electricity, safety, or dignified services to millions. That experience can breed radical anti-government libertarianism. Furber is on record saying the first QAnon message – "Open your eyes. Many in our govt worship Satan" – "made perfect sense" to him.

From Stanford to the Culture Wars



In 1995, Thiel and Sacks co-authored The Diversity Myth, a

polemic against “multiculturalism” at Stanford University. They argued that “there are almost no real racists . . . in America’s younger generation.” The book defended Western civilisation against what is now called “woke” ideology. Three decades later, those same men – now united in the so-called “PayPal mafia” – are backing a Republican ticket that has spread fabricated stories about Haitian immigrants in Ohio stealing and eating pets. Meanwhile, the Democrats have nominated a Black woman, Kamala Harris, for president – the third time in five elections that a Black candidate has led the party’s ticket.

An Old Mindset?

It would be reductive to say apartheid alone explains the politics of Musk, Thiel, Sacks, or Furber. Other forces – science fiction, Silicon Valley’s techno-libertarianism, and the simple self-interest of billionaires facing tax rises – also play major roles. Yet the parallels are suggestive. A particular worldview – inequality is natural; racial fears are rational; government is hopeless – found an extreme laboratory in apartheid South Africa. And that worldview, in modified form, now has a powerful voice in American Trumpism.

https://youtu.be/nvCQAD8rZGg