

# America - Land of the free, home of the jerk

## Elon Musk

Story by Robin Givhan

As the country counts down to Election Day with both anticipation and dread, Elon Musk — the billionaire who treats free speech like a weapon rather than a right — has managed to become even more disruptive than he has already been. The man who popularized the electric car industry as CEO of Tesla and turned Twitter from a public square into a squalid back alley known as X is now spending his free time doing air jacks for Donald Trump as the lead cheerleader in a get-out-the-vote effort for the Republican presidential nominee.

In addition to establishing his super PAC, [America PAC](#), through which he has [contributed at least](#) \$75 million in support of Trump, Musk has also [created a lottery](#) that each day through Nov. 5 will award one person \$1 million, as long as that person is a registered voter in one of seven swing states and has signed a petition confirming their support of the First and Second Amendments. The petition part is important: That's ostensibly what qualifies folks for the chance to win the windfall, not being a registered voter in one of the states with outsize influence on who becomes the country's next president. Paying people to vote is illegal. Although as a billionaire, Musk can pay pretty much any fine and unleash enough lawyers to keep a criminal investigation mired in obfuscating paperwork until the whole mess fades away. But mostly, the [people](#) who say they've won, and who have been [decked out](#) in bright red T-shirts and baseball hats touting the Trump-Vance ticket, don't seem particularly perturbed about the legality of the lottery. The money is the thing. And so is Musk.

There's a tendency in this land of the free and home of the entrepreneur to be enraptured by the sight of a successful businessman. And truth be told, aside from Oprah Winfrey, it's mostly wealthy men who seem to be wrapped in the mythology of all-knowing brilliance. Being an innovator in the technology sector means that plenty of folks have given Musk the presumption of wisdom on matters of free speech and the nature of government. This sort of thinking sowed some seeds for a Trump presidency — this desire to have the country run like a business and by a businessman. Except the country isn't a for-profit enterprise. Citizens aren't employees, and legislators shouldn't act like department heads all trying to manage up. The government's role is not to sell a product and maximize profits. And the president is certainly not a CEO who can summarily downsize the country to make it more nimble.

This business-minded obsession has made room for the idea of a president as someone who moves fast and breaks things, rather than one with an enduring respect for traditions and norms. It has allowed for the successful jerk, the callous dealmaker, the amoral numbers guy to take precedence over the statesman. Citizens might be comforted by a leader with an empathetic streak. Shareholders just want a honcho with a killer instinct.

The prominence of Musk in these waning days of the campaign season serves as a reminder of the degree to which this country has allowed the primacy of the individual to usurp the collective good — especially if the individual is wealthy. There's a cultural tendency to laud billionaires for simply being

pleasant, for doing things that are, by most estimations, normal. Or for simply not being *exceedingly* horrible. A little nastiness is perfectly tolerable.

There's something vulgar and condescending about Musk holding out the possibility of a \$1 million reward to people for simply doing their civic duty and registering to vote. It's an abomination that his aid to the regular person is based on luck [rather than an earnest investment in a community](#). It's a cynical performance by Musk to offer up a big payday to one lucky soul just for declaring their support for the Constitution, while the billionaire is busily dumping money into the campaign of someone who has shown more than a little [disdain](#) for that foundational document. Trump, after all, has mused about dismantling the Constitution for his own benefit.

Musk occupies a different place on the campaign trail than the celebrities who are headlining these last Hail Mary rallies. Bruce Springsteen, Lizzo, Usher and other boldface names have all been called in by Vice President Kamala Harris to ratchet up excitement for her campaign and get folks dancing all the way to the polls. The performers are using their star power — and their musical prowess — to draw as many eyes and ears as possible to the candidate with whom they stand.

Musk is brandishing his checkbook. The use of money and privilege as both a cudgel and a beatitude befits the Trump campaign. During his administration, Trump threw rolls of paper towels to Americans devastated by a hurricane as if he was lobbing free T-shirts to fans during a halftime show. He [handed a woman \\$100](#) for groceries during a September campaign stop in Pennsylvania as if that one-off handout was a full-blown economic policy for the country's working stiffs.

On Sunday, Trump spent approximately five minutes working the fry station at a McDonald's in Pennsylvania for the benefit of the news media but refused to engage on the subject of the \$7.25 an hour federal minimum wage and whether it should be higher. Instead, Trump used the stop to call his rival "Lyin' Kamala" for saying she worked at a McDonald's while she was in college, even though he has offered no evidence to dispute her fast-food employment. Trump *did* give away bags of McDonald's food to those who were assembled in advance and vetted by the Secret Service. And then those lucky Mickey D recipients were sent on their way having just won the Happy Meal lottery.

Musk is a far wealthier man than Trump, but he rivals the former president in the amount of personal grievance he carries. In this free country, he has been able to grow his wealth to outlandish levels and to dabble in practically any endeavor that interests him. He has been able to spew and vent and amplify antisemitic and racist dog whistles. He has been able to speak his mind, and the only price in doing so is that others get to speak theirs in return. He has been heard and listened to by those in power to a degree that a blue-collar worker could only dream. His money talks and so people listen; he has mistaken the sound of vast wealth for vast wisdom.

He has been declared [the world's richest person](#) and [troll](#). In this election season, neither seems good for America.