

Inside the Explosive Meeting Where Trump Officials Clashed With Sociopath Elon Musk

Simmering anger at the billionaire's unchecked power spilled out in a remarkable Cabinet Room meeting. The president quickly moved to rein in Mr. Musk.



By [Jonathan Swan](#) and [Maggie Haberman](#)

Jonathan Swan and Maggie Haberman are White House correspondents. They reported from Washington.

- 12:05 p.m. ET

Marco Rubio was incensed. Here he was in the Cabinet Room of the White House, the secretary of state, seated beside the president and listening to a litany of attacks from the richest man in the world.

Seated diagonally opposite, across the elliptical mahogany table, Elon Musk was letting Mr. Rubio have it, accusing him of failing to slash his staff.

You have fired “nobody,” Mr. Musk told Mr. Rubio, then scornfully added that perhaps the only person he had fired was a staff member from his Department of Government Efficiency.

Mr. Rubio had been privately furious with Mr. Musk for weeks, ever since his DOGE team effectively shuttered an entire agency that was supposedly under Mr. Rubio's control: the United States Agency for International Development. But, in the extraordinary cabinet meeting in front of the president and around 20 others — details of which have not been reported before — Mr. Rubio got his grievances off his chest.

Mr. Musk was not being truthful, Mr. Rubio said. What about the more than 1,500 State Department officials who took early retirement in buyouts? Didn't they count as layoffs? He asked, sarcastically, whether Mr. Musk wanted him to rehire all those people just so he could make a show of firing them again. Then he laid out his detailed plans for reorganizing the State Department.



Secretary of State Marco Rubio has been privately furious with Mr. Musk for weeks. Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

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Mr. Musk was unimpressed. He told Mr. Rubio he was “good on TV,” with the clear subtext being that he wasn’t good for much else. Throughout all of this, the president sat back in his chair, arms folded, as if he were watching a tennis match.

After the argument dragged on for an uncomfortable time, Mr. Trump finally intervened to defend Mr. Rubio as doing a “great job.” Mr. Rubio has a lot to deal with, the president said. He is very busy, he is always traveling and on TV, and he has an agency to run. So everyone just needs to work together.

The meeting was a potential inflection point after the frenetic first weeks of Mr. Trump’s second term. It yielded the first significant indication that Mr. Trump is willing to put some limits on Mr. Musk, whose efforts have become the subject of several lawsuits and prompted concerns from Republican lawmakers, some of whom have complained directly to the president.

Cabinet officials almost uniformly like the concept of what Mr. Musk set out to do — reducing waste, fraud and abuse in government — but have been frustrated by the hacksaw approach to upending the government and the lack of consistent coordination.

Thursday’s meeting, which was abruptly scheduled on Wednesday evening, was a sign that Mr. Trump is mindful of the growing complaints. He tried to offer each side something by praising both Mr. Musk and his cabinet secretaries. (At least one, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, who has had tense encounters related to Mr. Musk’s team, was not present.) The president made clear he still supported DOGE’s mission. But now was the time, he said, to be a bit more refined in its approach.

From now on, he said, the secretaries would be in charge; the Musk team would only advise.

It is unclear what the long-term impact of the meeting will be. Mr. Musk remains Mr. Trump's biggest political financial supporter — just this week his super PAC aired \$1 million worth of ads that said, "Thank you, Mr. President" — and Mr. Musk's control of the social media website X has made administration staff members and cabinet secretaries alike fearful that he will target them in public.

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The cabinet meeting was the first significant indication that President Trump is willing to put some limits on Mr. Musk. Eric Lee/The New York Times

But if nothing else, the session laid bare the tensions within Mr. Trump's team, and news of the sharp clashes spread quickly through

senior ranks of cabinet agencies after it was over. This account is based on interviews with five people with knowledge of the events. In a post on social media after the meeting, Mr. Trump said the next phase of his plan to cut the federal work force would be conducted with a “scalpel” rather than a “hatchet” — a clear reference to Mr. Musk’s scorched-earth approach.

Mr. Musk, who wore a suit and tie to Thursday’s meeting instead of his usual T-shirt after Mr. Trump publicly ribbed him about his sloppy appearance, defended himself by saying that he has three companies with a market cap of tens of billions of dollars, and that his results speak for themselves.

But he was soon clashing with members of the cabinet.

Just moments before the blowup with Mr. Rubio, Mr. Musk and the transportation secretary, Sean Duffy, went back and forth about the state of the Federal Aviation Administration’s equipment for tracking airplanes and what kind of fix is needed. Howard Lutnick, the commerce secretary, jumped in to support Mr. Musk.

Mr. Duffy said the young staff of DOGE was trying to lay off air traffic controllers. What am I supposed to do? Mr. Duffy said. I have multiple plane crashes to deal with now, and your people want me to fire air traffic controllers?



A crane removing pieces of an American Airlines plane that crashed in January from the Potomac River near Reagan National Airport in Arlington, Va. Al Drago for The New York Times

Mr. Musk told Mr. Duffy that his assertion was a “lie.” Mr. Duffy insisted it was not; he had heard it from them directly. Mr. Musk, asking who had been fired, said: Give me their names. Tell me their names. Mr. Duffy said there were not any names, because he had stopped them from being fired. At another point, Mr. Musk insisted that people hired under diversity, equity and inclusion programs were working in

control towers. Mr. Duffy pushed back and Mr. Musk did not add details, but said during the longer back and forth that Mr. Duffy had his phone number and should call him if he had any issues to raise.

The exchange ended with Mr. Trump telling Mr. Duffy that he had to hire people from M.I.T. as air traffic controllers. These air traffic controllers need to be “geniuses,” he said.

The secretary of veterans affairs, Doug Collins, has been dealing with one of the most politically sensitive challenges of all the cabinet secretaries. Mr. Musk’s cuts will affect thousands of veterans — a powerful constituency and a core part of the Trump base. Mr. Collins made the point that they should not wield a blunt instrument and cleave off everyone from the V.A. They needed to be strategic about it. Mr. Trump agreed with Mr. Collins, saying they ought to retain the smart ones and get rid of the bad ones.

In response to a request for comment from The New York Times, Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said in a statement: “As President Trump said, this was a great and productive meeting amongst members of his team to discuss cost-cutting measures and staffing across the federal government. Everyone is working as one team to help President Trump deliver on his promise to make our government more efficient.”

Tammy Bruce, a spokeswoman for the State Department, responded, “Secretary Rubio considered the meeting an open and productive discussion with a dynamic team that is united in achieving the same goal: making America great again.”

A Department of Veterans Affairs spokesman said, “As President Trump has said, it’s important to increase efficiency and reduce bureaucracy while keeping in place the best and most productive

federal employees. V.A. is working with DOGE and the rest of the administration to do just that.”

A Transportation Department official would not comment.

Mr. Musk, who later claimed on X that the cabinet meeting was “very productive,” seemed far less enthused inside the room. He aggressively defended himself, reminding the cabinet secretaries that he had built multiple billion-dollar companies from the ground up and knew something about hiring good people.



Members of labor groups demonstrated against Mr. Musk and the Department of Government Efficiency. Valerie Plesch for The New York Times

Most cabinet members did not join the fray. Mr. Musk's anger directed at Mr. Rubio in particular seemed to catch people in the room by surprise, one person with knowledge of the meeting said. Another person said Mr. Musk's caustic responses to Mr. Duffy and Mr. Rubio seemed to deter other cabinet members, many of whom have privately complained about DOGE, from speaking.

But it remains to be seen how long this new arrangement will last.

Jonathan Swan is a White House reporter covering the administration of Donald J. Trump. **More about Jonathan Swan**

Maggie Haberman is a White House correspondent, reporting on the second, nonconsecutive term of Donald J. Trump. **More about Maggie Haberman**

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- **Caught in Work Force Overhaul:** Veterans, who make up a disproportionate share of federal employees, are [feeling the brunt of the Trump administration's rapid push to downsize](#) the work force, generating discord in a reliable political base for Republicans.

Trump Ramps Up Attacks on Law Firms With Order Targeting Perkins Coie

The order against the firm, which did work for Democrats during the 2016 campaign, represents an escalation of efforts to punish groups the president sees as aiding his enemies.

President Trump signed [an executive order](#) on Thursday seeking to severely punish the law firm Perkins Coie by stripping its lawyers of security clearances and access to government buildings and officials — a form of payback for its legal work for Democrats during the 2016 presidential campaign.

With the order, Perkins Coie becomes the second such firm to be targeted by the president. Late last month, he signed a similar memorandum [attacking Covington & Burling](#), which has done pro bono legal work for Jack Smith, who as special counsel pursued two separate indictments of Mr. Trump.

While the Covington memorandum sought to strip clearances and contracts from that firm, the Perkins Coie order goes much further, seeking to also limit its lawyers' access to federal buildings, officials and jobs in a way that could cast a chilling effect over the entire legal profession.

The president's animosity toward Perkins Coie dates back eight years, to when two lawyers at the firm, Marc Elias and Michael Sussmann, played roles in what eventually became an F.B.I. investigation to determine if anyone on the 2016 Trump presidential campaign conspired with Russian agents to influence the outcome of that election. Both lawyers left that firm years ago.

The executive order denounces what it calls "dishonest and dangerous activity" at Perkins Coie, singling out its hiring of a research firm that led to the compilation of a dossier of unsubstantiated allegations against Mr. Trump related to possible ties between his campaign and Russia. The executive order accused the firm of "undermining democratic elections, the integrity of our courts and honest law enforcement."

The order instructs federal agencies to suspend any security clearances that Perkins Coie lawyers may have. It also orders government agencies to determine if they have any contracts with the law firm, and then cancel them.

Additionally, the order instructs the heads of all federal agencies to limit Perkins Coie lawyers' access to federal buildings "when such access would threaten the national security of or otherwise be inconsistent with the interests of the United States." It also instructs federal officials to limit their interactions with employees of the firm and seeks to prevent Perkins Coie lawyers from being hired by the federal government.

It is not clear what immediate effect the presidential decree will have on the firm. The president and his supporters have railed against what they call the "weaponization" of the legal system against him, arguing that he was unfairly targeted by prosecutors, judges and private practice lawyers for political purposes, rather than any wrongdoing on his part.

"This is an absolute honor to sign," Mr. Trump said at the White House. "What they've done is just terrible. It's weaponization, you could say weaponization against a political opponent, and it should never be allowed to happen again."

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The same executive order also accuses the firm of unfair hiring practices, and calls for a far-reaching review of top law firms to see if they promote diversity, equity or inclusion in a way that the Trump administration dislikes.

The federal review ordered by Mr. Trump will seek to determine "whether large law firms reserve certain positions, such as summer associate spots, for individuals of preferred races; promote individuals on a discriminatory basis; permit client access on a discriminatory

basis; or provide access to events, trainings or travel on a discriminatory basis.”

A spokesman for Perkins Coie did not immediately respond to a request for comment. It was not immediately clear how many lawyers at the firm have security clearances.

Mr. Trump filed a lawsuit against Perkins Coie in 2022, accusing the firm, along with his former rival Hillary Clinton and others, of participating in a left-wing conspiracy to derail his presidential campaign. That lawsuit was quickly tossed by a judge who said it lacked substance and legal support.

Earlier this week, the president of the American Bar Association, William R. Bay, warned that Mr. Trump might take additional punitive measures against law firms he does not like, and said such behavior undermines the nation’s legal system.

“Lawyers must be free to represent clients and perform their ethical duty without fear of retribution,” Mr. Bay said in a written statement. He added: “We reject the notion that the government can punish lawyers who represent certain clients or punish judges who rule certain ways. We cannot accept government actions that seek to tip the scales of justice in this manner.”

Luke Broadwater contributed reporting.

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