

It is Elon Musk who is now running the United States. Not Donald Trump

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An unelected billionaire is running the state through a shadow government without formal checks – the constitutional order, now, is largely window dressing

It's one of the humiliations of our historical moment that the constitutional order has been destroyed by such stupid and unserious people. On the trail with [Donald Trump](#), the billionaire Elon Musk, who financed Trump's campaign to the tune of about \$250m, pledged to cut \$2tn from the federal budget, a project that promised to wreck the economy, destroy the nation's credit, eliminate programs and institutions that structure people's lives and create an international economic and leadership vacuum into which America's rivals – namely, China – could step.

This would have been ominous enough on its own. But because Musk is a narcissist and a nerd – because he insists on discarding solemnity and being ostentatiously irreverent and carefree as he destroys people's lives – he named his new project the “department of government efficiency”, or Doge, a juvenile reference to a years-old internet meme featuring a shiba inu.

It is under this idiotic banner that Musk has upended the American system of government, seizing an unprecedented, unelected and seemingly wholly unaccountable degree of personal power. Less than three weeks into the Trump restoration, Doge is well under way.

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The group is not a government department; Musk is not a cabinet member and has not been subjected to a Senate confirmation process. But he now reportedly has an office in the West Wing, along with one in the Eisenhower executive office building across the street. At his direction, a small group of coders and engineers – men reported to be aged between 19 and 25 years old – are fanning out across federal agencies, seizing control of their sensitive data and making proposals for massive cuts.

Just days after Trump's inauguration, Musk reportedly sent an email to all 2 million federal employees – subject line Fork in the Road – encouraging [them to resign](#) ahead of anticipated mass firings. Musk reportedly offered workers a buyout of seven months' pay; it's doubtful whether any of those who take him up on the offer will ever receive it. Musk and his young followers have moved to shutter specific programs that they deem wasteful – including those whose funds have been allocated by Congress – and to shutter whole departments. He has declared the closure of USAid, America's foreign aid agency, and is reportedly looking to eliminate much of the Department of Education and the Department of Labor, along with privatizing the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#). He has seized control of the treasury, and specifically the treasury's payment system, granting himself a personal line-item veto on all government spending. He also has gained access to reams of private and sensitive data and has reportedly downloaded much of it on to private servers. He can access bank accounts, medical histories, income and debt records. If he cared to, he could look up your social security number.

No one elected Musk and very little of what he is doing is legal. It is Congress, not some random rich guy, who is granted the power of the purse, because the citizens deserve to have a say, through their elected representatives, in how the government spends their tax dollars. Federal civil servants are protected by law from purges, because the federal bureaucracy is supposed to serve the people of the United States, not to merely function as courtiers and enforcers of whim for some entitled foreign billionaire who nobody has ever voted for.

There is a chance that Musk will be told to stop his unconstitutional dismantling of the federal government by a court order, one he might even obey; there is a chance that he will get scared, declare a hasty victory and back off. But that chance looks more and more remote. Musk, now, has seized control of many of the organs of state. There also does not seem to be any way to stop him.

Trump critics have long predicted an oncoming rift between Musk and Trump, but it's not clear, exactly, that it is from Trump that Musk is deriving his power: his gutting of federal agencies and slashing of federal expenditures seems to be coming from his own preferences and impulses, not as any direction from the man who is nominally the president.

It may be Trump, that is, who sits in the Oval Office, and it may be Trump who takes to television every few days to sign yet another executive order seeking to punish and humiliate trans people. But it is Musk who controls government operations and federal spending, and so it is Musk who is running the country. The constitutional order, now, is largely window dressing. The reality is that a foreign billionaire is running the state through a shadow government, and that his power has no formal check.

Another humiliation of our era: that to merely state what is happening sounds hyperbolic, even unhinged. Musk, after all, is such a morally small man – so transparent in his corrupt self-interest, so childish in his peevish self-regard – that it is hard to countenance him as such a profound agent of history.

He represents not so much the banality as the imbecility of evil: how shallow and vacuous it is. Yet Musk's personal, private seizure of state power has thrown real doubt on whether the US constitution is still in effect. How can it be, if he upends its demands so heedlessly, and with such impunity? How can it be, if the power of the people's elected representatives can simply be wished away by a man rich enough to buy anyone?

For a long time now, it has been clear that America was slipping out of a liberal democratic mode of governance and into something more vulgar and less accountable, something more like a privatized racket for the rich that extracts from and punishes the

people, but never responds to their will. We knew this was coming. I just didn't expect it to be so embarrassing.