

# **Musk Scandal at USAID Takes Unnerving Turn With Vile Leaked Memo**

**Can Trump and his top advisers really just act with total impunity? Or is there, just maybe, a price to be paid for starving poor people and un-indicting a corrupt mayor?**

Shockingly, it turns out that empowering the richest human being on the planet to maliciously and gratuitously heap additional misery on that planet's most poor, hungry, and desperate people might—just might—pose a niggling political problem to President Donald Trump.

There seems to be a split in Trumpworld these days. Some seem to think Trump can get away with anything, no matter how devastating it is to the most vulnerable or how corrupt an abuse of power it

represents. Others seem aware that there are limits—that at some point, Trumpworld might push things too far and suffer a public backlash, and that this might actually matter.

A new internal memo circulating inside the U.S. Agency for International Development neatly captures this split. *The Washington Post* reports that the memo warns USAID employees not to communicate with the press about the shocking disruptions in humanitarian assistance that are being caused by the Trump-Musk attack on the agency, which are already producing horrific consequences. The memo said this transgression might be met with “dismissal.”

The memo claims to be correcting a “false narrative in the press” about the disruptions to that assistance. It notes that Secretary of State Marco Rubio last month issued a waiver to “lifesaving humanitarian assistance,” allowing it to continue despite the Trump-Musk freeze in agency spending. This has meant that this assistance has “continued uninterrupted and has never paused,” the memo claims, while warning recipients against any “unauthorized external engagement with the press.”

This is highly disingenuous at best and mostly nonsense at worst. As *The New York Times* reports, some senior USAID officials recently received an email explicitly directing them to hold off on approving some of this assistance, pending more directives from on high. What's more, according to the *Times*, while some of this assistance did continue due to Rubio's waiver, much of it has encountered serious obstacles.

This assistance—which includes aid for lifesaving food, shelter, and medicine—has gotten bogged down as USAID employees and groups that partner with the agency to distribute these things have struggled to access government funding streams halted by Trump. (A judge has ordered the funds to continue.) In one case, Musk claimed that the administration had restarted some disease-prevention funding, but it remains frozen, the *Times* reported.

The directive ordering USAID employees to refrain from discussing this with the press represents an unnerving turn in this saga, given how ugly and blatant it is. "This is basically telling USAID personnel not to tell the truth about what they have seen," Jeremy Konyndyk, a former senior USAID official, told me, adding that this functionally

commands USAID staff to “get in line with the propaganda narrative.”

Yet the memo also shows that USAID leaks are infuriating Trump officials precisely because they are exposing the horrifying consequences of the Trump-Musk efforts to cripple this agency.

In this context, let’s also recall that the USAID inspector general recently released a report finding that due to the Trump-Musk pause of funding, nearly \$500 million in food assistance was at risk of spoiling. That revealed an extraordinarily cruel and wanton attitude toward the global poor, and barely 24 hours after the USAID inspector general revealed all this, Trump fired him.

It’s hard to adequately capture the absurdity and malevolence on display here. The whole function of I.G.s is to independently document waste, inefficiency, and corruption inside government. That’s what the USAID I.G. did in documenting the mismanagement that put huge stores of taxpayer-purchased food at risk of going to waste. *This is exactly what I.G.s are supposed to do.* But apparently because it made Trump and Musk look bad, the I.G. got the ax.

Here you see Trumpworld believing both that they are politically vulnerable to revelations about the misery they're inflicting on some of the world's poorest people—they were clearly stung by the I.G.'s findings—and also that they can unabashedly fire the watchdogs who reveal it. They conspicuously did this right after the revelations hit, suggesting they lean toward feeling they can act with total impunity.

Underscoring the point, Vice President JD Vance has tried to justify Trump's "America first" agenda as in keeping with Christian teachings about the proper hierarchy of obligations, with those outside our country being of lower priority. Vance apparently feels *some* pressure to morally justify Trump's agenda. Yet that claim is so preposterous that it was denounced by Pope Francis, and it absurdly flies in the face of what we're seeing with USAID and other "America first" policies, which shows Trump-Musk-Vance systematically abandoning our obligations to the global poor with an indifference bordering on venality. Vance, intoxicated with hubris, seemingly thinks he can get away with saying anything.

This split is evident elsewhere. White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt recently

dismissed the idea that Trump-Musk abuses of power constitute a constitutional crisis as a “dishonest narrative,” apparently revealing sensitivity about such perceptions. But on Friday, Trump border czar Tom Homan swaggered on to national television and “joked” that New York Mayor Eric Adams may face prosecution if he doesn’t meet Trump’s demand for cooperation with his immigration agenda:

Thinly veiled Homan warning to Adams: “If he doesn’t come through ... I’ll be in his office, up his butt, saying, Where the hell is the agreement we came to” [pic.twitter.com/Pq0msJXZGb](https://pic.twitter.com/Pq0msJXZGb)  
— Emily Ngo (@emilyngo) February 14, 2025

This comes after Trump’s Justice Department ordered career prosecutors to drop an ongoing, carefully assembled prosecution of Adams, explicitly because Trump wants that full cooperation on immigration. This clear quid pro quo is triggering resignations at the department, with some prosecutors speaking out powerfully in protest. For Homan to make a big joke out of this on Fox News while blow-dried TV sycophants giggle in the background is the act of someone who doesn’t believe he’ll ever be held accountable for anything.

Meanwhile, on still another front, Leavitt—who recently seemed eager to tamp down perceptions that we’re enduring a constitutional crisis—unfurled her own big middle finger at constitutional governance this week. After the White House barred the Associated Press from the media briefing room, Leavitt blithely confirmed that this is retaliation for the AP’s refusal to describe the Gulf of Mexico as the “Gulf of America,” per Trump’s diktat:

COLLINS: Which White House official made the decision to bar the AP reporter?

LEAVITT: It is a privilege to cover this WH

C: Isn't this retaliatory?

LEAVITT: It is a fact that the body of water off the coast of Louisiana is called the Gulf of America [pic.twitter.com/5gxGborPgs](https://pic.twitter.com/5gxGborPgs)  
— Aaron Rupar (@atrupar) February 12, 2025

Musk, Homan, Leavitt, and others inside Trumpworld are profoundly infected with arrogance—they appear unshakably certain that they’ll never pay a price for any of this, no matter how cruel their policies or how flagrant their abuses of power. Yet here and there, you can see glimmers of awareness peeking out of Trumpworld that their grip on power is impermanent and provisional. And, yes, as far-fetched as this might appear at this unsettling moment, they also seem dimly aware that this hold on power will

ultimately be dependent on what American voters decide.

### **Greg Sargent**

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