

# Musk and Trump: Why the billionaire bromance will end in tears

From hateful rants to a spectacular reconciliation and election triumph, this love-in could be the real deal – or turn sour

Iain Hollingshead

Related Topics

- Elon Musk,
- Donald Trump,
- SpaceX,
- Tesla,
- US Election,
- Twitter

[239](#)

•



If Donald Trump and Elon Musk didn't have such an antagonistic relationship with Hollywood, one could almost imagine a studio commissioning a blockbuster film about the on-off bromance between the real estate mogul turned reality TV star turned US President – and the Democrat-leaning tech entrepreneur turned MAGA cheerleader turned co-head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency.

This latest plot point, announced on Tuesday by the president-elect, marks the end of act II and the reconciliation phase in their turbulent relationship. To get to this stage, both protagonists have embarked on remarkable “journeys”. Musk, a South African who became a US citizen in 2002, voted mainly for the Democrats for the next two decades, including in 2016 when he said that Trump was “not the right guy to be president”. Regardless, he joined two government advisory roles before quitting in 2017 in protest at his boss's withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement. Five years later, Musk was far more Republican (he objected to the Biden administration's fondness for investigating his companies and closing factories during Covid) but no more pro-Trump, whom he told in 2022 to “hang up his hat and sail into the sunset” while endorsing his rival Ron DeSantis. Never knowingly undermined, Trump hit back at a “bull---- artist” who sold “electric cars that don't drive long enough, driverless cars that crash... [and] rocketships to nowhere, without which subsidies he'd be worthless”.

“I could have said, ‘Drop to your knees and beg’, and he would have done it,” he added for good measure.



Who's the boss? Donald Trump with his then-foe Elon Musk during a meeting with business leaders in the White House in Washington DC in 2017 Credit: AP

Fast-forward another two years, through a whirling montage of Twitter acquisitions, reinstatements and interviews; failed assassinations; MAGA rally stage leaping; and Super PACs (political action committees) dispensing \$200 million, and it seems the only reason the richest man in the world would drop to his knees in front of the most powerful man in the world would be to declare his undying love – before sailing off into the sunset together.

For now, at least, the feeling is mutual. “A star is born – Elon,” said Trump when he regained the presidency last week. “He’s a character, he’s a special guy, he’s a super genius.”

But what can we expect from the third and final act of When Donald Met Elon? Will Musk’s new mission to cut government waste and red tape, a department that Trump has hailed as “potentially the Manhattan Project of our time”, keep the peace for another four years? Or will it blow up in both their faces?

There are certainly many ways in which two 6ft 2in billionaires with a fondness for attention-seeking, social media, yes men, models, entrepreneurism, populism, firing people, attacking the mainstream media, enforcing strong borders and fighting woke ideology now see eye to eye. Before 2018 Musk would occasionally tweet Pride flags. Now he appeals to the same “bro vote” where Trump made significant electoral inroads.

“If it wasn’t for him [Musk], we’d be f-----,” said Joe Rogan, the American podcaster, who has interviewed both men at length in the past month. “He makes what I think is the most compelling case for Trump you’ll hear, and I agree with him every step of the way.”

Other supporters have been even more enthusiastic. “Remember when @elonmusk walked into Twitter, fired all the woke retards and made the place 80% smaller but 1,000% better?” tweeted Andrew Tate, the

controversial internet influencer, last week. "Wait till you see what he does with government."



‘A star is born – Elon,’ said Trump when he regained the presidency. ‘He’s a character, he’s a special guy, he’s a super genius’ Credit: Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images

Both Trump and Musk stand to benefit from the latest attempt to “drain the swamp”, which they believe will cut bureaucratic red tape and unleash economic growth. It is, however, Musk who might gain the most, given his companies’ extensive dealings with US regulators. And what happens to the probes into Musk’s companies? SpaceX, which has contracts with, among others, Nasa, the Department of Defense and the Departments of Transportation and Energy, is being investigated by the Federal Aviation Administration; Tesla, whose value increased by \$100 billion in the 24 hours after Trump’s victory, is being investigated by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration over its software systems; and X is being investigated by the Securities and Exchange Commission over possible violations into securities laws.

It is difficult to imagine a president who wrote *The Art of the Deal* letting a man worth 44 times more than him have his way across the board. As Gita Johar, a professor at Columbia Business School, said in a recent interview, the term “‘conflict of interest’ seems rather quaint” to describe Musk’s potential influence on the government.

Neither is Trump fond of failure – and it seems unlikely that Musk’s new role will work out as well as he hopes. The federal government, which has proved itself stubbornly resistant to reform by everyone from Roosevelt to Nixon to Reagan, employs almost three million people, with a budget of \$6.5 trillion. It is not X, which is now estimated to be worth a quarter of the \$44 billion Musk paid for it.

“There’s a degree of Dunning-Kruger about both Musk and Trump – the presumption of expertise in fields which they know little about,” explains Bruce Daisley, a writer and former vice-president at Twitter (who left before Musk joined). “When Musk arrived, a lot of people were excited about someone with a titanic reputation who had created two enormous businesses. But when he started opining about what needed to be fixed, anyone with any expertise realised that he knew nothing about running a platform. His answers crumbled in daylight.”





Musk appeared on the campaign trail for Trump, including in Pennsylvania in October, pictured

There are other trip hazards in a relationship between two men whose interests are not as aligned as they might hope. Trump's hawkish picks for his Cabinet suggest a strong line on China, home to 40 per cent of Tesla's manufacturing capacity and over a fifth of its 2023 revenue. "F--- oil," says Musk, a product his on-off boss calls "liquid gold" while championing traditional car manufacturers in Detroit. And what happens to SpaceX's Starlink's contract with the Pentagon if Trump winds down Nato's support for Ukraine?

Ultimately, however, as all screenwriters know, good dramatic tension always comes down to personalities, not policies. And given the outsized egos of these alpha males, both of whom view themselves as the sole protagonist, a happy ending to act III appears even farther-fetched than most Hollywood films.

Already there are anonymous briefings emerging from Trump staffers at Mar-a-Lago about the guest who appears ever-present. Musk has joined the president-elect in everything from family photocalls to golf matches with his granddaughter to phone calls with President Zelensky. The screenwriters' character bible would suggest that either Trump will grow bored with Musk, as he does with everyone eventually, or feel eclipsed by him, as he did with Steve Bannon. Either way, precedent would certainly suggest that he will fall out with him, as he did in his first term with James Mattis, Rex Tillerson (whom he sacked on Twitter) and, of course, Musk himself.

Musk, for his part, is no stranger to public spats, sparring with everyone from Mark Zuckerberg to Bill Gates to, of course, Trump.

"They're both narcissists and there can only be one narcissist at the head of the country, and that's Donald Trump, who just won the election," Kara Swisher, a Silicon Valley journalist who knows Musk well, told CNN.

Daisley agrees. "Musk doesn't like being a supporting character," he says. "And Trump has got a job he can never have."

Unless that's the ultimate plot twist for *When Donald Met Elon: The Sequel*.