

## TERRY GROSS EXPOSES HOW ELON MUSK BOUGHT THE GOVERNMENT

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. A new investigation into conflicts of interest posed by Elon Musk overseeing the drastic cost-cutting and dismantling of some federal agencies was published yesterday afternoon in The New York Times online. A few hours later, Musk and President Trump held a joint press conference during which they insisted Musk was operating with full transparency. Trump said he wouldn't allow Musk to look into areas that posed a conflict of interest.

Musk controls six private companies, including SpaceX, Tesla and X - formerly Twitter. He gets billions of dollars from the federal government. My guest, Eric Lipton, along with Times reporter Kirsten Grind, spent the past year investigating Musk's business with the federal government. They learned that at least 11 federal agencies have more than 32 continuing investigations, pending complaints or enforcement actions into Musk's companies. Yesterday, before the Trump-Musk press conference, I spoke to Lipton about what the investigation uncovered.

Eric Lipton, welcome to FRESH AIR. You're a reporter looking into these conflicts of interest. Is there anyone in an official capacity in the Trump administration or in Congress, or in any other official capacity, who is doing an investigation into possible conflicts of interest between Elon Musk and the departments and agencies that he is cutting jobs and costs?

ERIC LIPTON: That's the somewhat startling thing to me as a reporter at this moment, is that there's really no one else beyond us - the team that's working on it from The New York Times - and other journalists, because just in the last few days, Trump fired the head of the Office of Government Ethics. He's removed the inspectors general across the government - at least 17 of them. The Congress is controlled by Republicans. So, therefore, the Democrats who might be more critical of him don't have subpoena power, and they don't really, therefore, have significant investigative powers. And the Department of Justice is controlled by someone who's completely loyal to Trump. So there

really is not much of an investigative capacity or an investigative desire, beyond reporters that are attempting to drill into this without subpoena power.

GROSS: And the Office of Government Ethics, which you mentioned - Trump just fired the head of it this week. That office had pending requests to investigate Musk for conflicts of interest. On what grounds?

LIPTON: That's right. I mean, really, there's never been anything quite like Elon Musk. This is a guy whose companies just last year, in 2024, received \$3.8 billion worth of federal government contracts and, in the last five years, \$13 billion worth of contracts. He has investigations pending of his various corporate entities in the dozens. And it's just sort of an acronym soup of federal agencies that either have pending investigations, lawsuits, subpoenaing him - all kinds of things that are active and that are in play and therefore vulnerable to being shut down. Not only, therefore, does he have billions of dollars at stake financially; but he has, you know, dozens of investigations targeting him at the same time as he has this immense power reaching across, you know, really the whole breadth of the federal government. There really has never been a conflict so broad in - probably in American history.

GROSS: So he is investigating spending and possible fraud in agencies and departments throughout the government. Is anybody investigating if there's any inefficiency or fraud in the about \$3 billion he's getting from the government?

LIPTON: Well, I mean, again, the president, Trump, just neutered all 17 of the inspectors general who really had the greatest capacity to investigate potential waste, fraud and abuse in his contracts. And we know that multiple IGs had pending investigations, including the Department of Defense, which was examining whether or not he had violated the terms of having a top-secret security clearance because he wasn't properly reporting engagements he had with foreign government figures. As far as we understand, there are still questions being asked relative to that inquiry. But the individual who oversees that office has been replaced and, therefore, it could be a dead end, even if staff is still working on it. So the short answer is it's unlikely that he will

be the subject of very close scrutiny, just like it's unlike President Trump will be the subject of close scrutiny, because there really is no one left outside of journalists to be asking hard questions.

GROSS: The National Labor Relations Board has 24 investigations into Musk's companies. Can you tell us a little bit about the nature of some of those investigations?

LIPTON: Well, for example, during the takeover of Twitter and its transformation into X, there were employees who felt that they were being improperly treated. They were dismissed. They were being subject to internal investigations. And they felt as if they had been unfairly treated, and they filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Board. But what Trump then did in the last few weeks was to eliminate the quorum at the National Labor Relations Board by firing several of the commissioners. And so, therefore, the commission can no longer act on recommendations from the staff to file a lawsuit against the target of any investigation, or to agree to a settlement if there were to be a settlement proposed. So he's effectively frozen the National Labor Relations Board by removing the majority of its board.

GROSS: And it's interesting, 'cause it sounds like some of the investigations into Musk's companies from the National Labor Relations Board are similar to the kinds of suits that Musk may face because of the way he's eliminating positions in federal agencies.

LIPTON: Yeah. I mean, Musk is taking a very similar approach to that which he took at Twitter and applying it to the federal government, which is to slash it radically and rapidly without much consideration for the consequences, both for the services that it provides and for the people that work there. You know, the Democrats in Congress can write letters asking for reviews, and they can have protests and press conferences. But that's about the limit of their power as well. They don't have subpoena power. And they cannot, you know, have bipartisan investigations into really anything at this point.

GROSS: What about the courts?

LIPTON: I mean, the courts, as we've seen, are really the one place - and the state attorneys general, the Democrats, have filed, you know, litigation. And

there are various nonprofit groups and employee groups and labor unions that have filed litigation. And that has actually made a significant difference so far. I think to some extent, the strategy on the part of the Trump administration is just to blow through those district court rulings, to continue to operate the way that they are, to sometimes even potentially ignore the court orders and just wait for it to get to the Court of Appeals and then the Supreme Court, to try to prove their argument, which is that the executive power is supreme and that they can largely do what they want. You know, Trump and Musk both have a history of basically doing what they want, and despite inquiries or, at times, even, you know, court orders.

GROSS: Let's look at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which was founded by Senator - Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren. It received hundreds of complaints about Tesla, revolving around debt collection or loan problems. Tell us a little bit about the complaints.

LIPTON: I mean, they're mostly small-bore things, that, you know, people who bought cars were having disputes with the company over loans or the terms of financing, or the cars being - were being repossessed because of potentially, you know, unpaid debts. You know, that's not that unusual, to have - for a big company to have complaints like that. You can just go do a query on the CFPB's website - if it still is up when you do the query - but there are hundreds of them. And the more significant thing for Elon Musk is his company X is planning on going into financial services and potentially offering, you know, banking-like services. And then the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau would have direct jurisdiction over his company's operations if they go into financial services, and I think that he doesn't want to have those kinds of questions asked.

GROSS: He basically shut down the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

LIPTON: He called for - he said the CFPB rest - you know, RIP in a - now, whether or not he actually shut it down, he clearly supported it. He was mocking it and, you know, said, RIP, rest in peace, for the agency. Now, I can't tell you that he's the one that decided or that he's the one that executed on that shutdown, but he clearly supported it and played a role.

GROSS: Let's look at the Federal Aviation Agency, which has fined SpaceX for safety violations. Tell a story about the launch of the satellite - the SpaceX satellite.

LIPTON: In the fall of 2023, there was a launch of a 10-ton satellite into geosynchronous orbit, which is, like, 22,000 miles out there. And it's the largest satellite ever launched in terms of its mass to that orbit. And it's a pretty big deal. It's there for a satellite communications company. And that launch went off without really much public notice. Falcon 9 and Falcon Heavy are launching so frequently now, we don't even almost pay attention to them. But what was happening behind the scenes was that even before that - as the countdown was underway, the FAA concluded that SpaceX did not have proper authorization for a new fueling system that they had built there at the space launch facility in Florida. And they were challenging the continuation of the launch, but the launch went ahead anyway.

And so after it was over, the FAA said, that was a safety violation, and we're going to fine you hundreds of thousands of dollars. And Elon Musk was very angry at that. He was like, what do you think you're doing? You're interfering in our operations. There was no safety threat. And the FAA is getting in our way. And he called for the firing of the FAA administrator, and he said, I'm going to sue the FAA. He really went - and then he went so far as to say, you know, they're preventing our efforts to get humans to Mars and, you know, our grand ambitions.

GROSS: Two hundred eighty-three thousand and nine dollars - that's, like, just a few dollars more than \$283,000 - is probably a pittance to Elon Musk. So why is this such an offense to him?

LIPTON: Yeah. It's trivial. I think the biggest thing that really frustrates him about the FAA is the amount of time it takes to get clearances to do new launches, particularly for the Starship, which is his newest rocket, the largest rocket that humans have ever built. And he is extremely frustrated at how long it takes to get clearance to do additional test flights of the Starship. And he wants the FAA to get out of the way. He thinks that the FAA is slowing his effort to get, you know, humans to Mars.

And, I mean, I think that that fine is really trivial and that that's just a kind of a small, you know, piddling thing that is a symptom of his bigger annoyance with the agency and also with the Department of Interior, which is looking at the environmental harm that the launches are causing in south Texas and the destruction of the habitat of threatened bird species, for example, which I've witnessed myself, personally. I was out there for a launch and then walked the grounds with a wildlife biologist from the - Fish and Wildlife, and we saw the destroyed nest eggs from the blast of the Starship, which basically threw pounds - you know, gravel across a state park towards federal wildlife refuge. So that damage is occurring, and the fact that people are even looking at that and questioning it really frustrates Elon Musk.

GROSS: Let me reintroduce you.

If you're just joining us, my guess is New York Times investigative reporter Eric Lipton. He's been investigating Musk's conflicts of interest in Musk's new position as the head of DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency. We'll be right back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Eric Lipton. His latest article is about Musk's conflicts of interest in his new position as the head of DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency, which is cutting costs - drastically cutting costs in some federal departments and agencies and laying off or trying to shut down some of those places. So the SEC, the Securities and Exchange Commission, has been investigating what Musk paid for Twitter and the backstory to that. So would you explain that?

LIPTON: Yeah. The Securities and Exchange Commission is investigating whether or not Musk failed to honor a requirement to disclose - at the moment that he obtained 5% of Twitter, he needed to make a public filing. And the reason you do that is that you need to share with other investors if you are a significant owner of any particular corporation, and that's relevant, you know, material information about the company. But instead of notifying the SEC and making that public disclosure, he continued to buy, you know, thousands and thousands of additional shares. And so effectively, he was able

to buy those shares at a significantly discounted price, saving approximately \$150 million as he accumulated shares of Twitter before he ultimately took over the whole company.

So they filed a lawsuit saying, you failed to honor the federal law that requires you to disclose once you exceed 5%. And Musk and his lawyers were like, this is a technicality. You're just being annoying. This is being done for political purposes to try to punish us when this is a minor violation that you shouldn't even be going after us about. And now the - two of the members of the SEC that were - that voted to go ahead with that litigation are now gone. Now, in this case, it was not an action by Trump. This was Gary Gensler, the chairman, who was a Democrat, who resigned and a second Democrat, who, for personal reasons, left the agency. But the net result is that the Republicans now have a majority on the SEC. And so the likely outcome is that this will be settled at a very modest penalty or maybe even withdrawn as litigation.

GROSS: So what were the consequences of Musk having purchased 5% of Twitter stock before saying that he was going to buy it?

LIPTON: Other investors would have likely bought Twitter stock at that point. That would have been a sign that Musk had the intention of potentially buying the company out. If you're going to accumulate that much stock, then that would have led other people to buy in thinking, oh, well, I better buy it now because Musk is going to be willing to pay a higher price to take the whole thing over. And so he saved \$150 million by getting the stock at a cheaper price during the period between when he should have filed a disclosure and when he actually did.

GROSS: Was it hard to report the story and get the information that you needed? When I say this story, I mean...

LIPTON: Yeah.

GROSS: ...The whole story you've written about conflicts of interest.

LIPTON: In the fall, we spent a month looking at all of Musk operations with the federal government - all of his contracts, all the investigations. We had a database that was built, and it allowed us to quickly know what the pending lawsuits, investigations and contracts were. So it was - actually, it didn't take

nearly as much time, now that we knew where all the matters were, to go back and look and see, OK, several members of the National Labor Relations Board have been fired. It no longer has a quorum. Or, two members of the SEC have left, or the chairwoman of the Federal Election Commission has just been fired, or the head of the Office of Government Ethics has been removed. And we were able to cross-reference all of these actions that Trump has taken and look at the investigations that we knew about and see that these have been disrupted. We did not find evidence, so far, that Musk reached in himself and determined these outcomes. But what we were able to establish is that he has clearly benefited from all of the disruption that has occurred.

GROSS: How much do you think Musk's efforts, combined with Trump's desire to basically gut a lot of government - how much is that reshaping what the federal government is?

LIPTON: I mean, I think that this is going to be significant, depending on whether or not it's not completely overturned by federal courts. But I think that this is going to be one of the bigger realignments in modern decades of the scale and reach of the federal government, if they are able to play this out as they hope.

And I don't - you know, do I really believe that Musk is doing this to try to influence how his companies are treated? No, I don't. I think that he does think that the government has - you know, there's too much federal regulatory overreach, that there's inefficiencies. And, I mean, this is a guy who has - the reason that he is so massively successful in building SpaceX is he built the most efficient commercial space company, you know, in the history of the space industry, and the cost of getting to orbit has radically reduced because of his efficiencies. He's a master at reducing the cost of assembly line operations and building rockets that get into orbit. And he's bringing that same approach to the federal government, and he's really disrupting it. But in the process of that, the disruption is benefiting his own companies, and that is a conflict of interest.

GROSS: So, you know, we've been talking about several agencies that Musk has conflicts of interest with. But if you put all of the departments and all the



agencies together that he is using his team to cut costs and cut jobs - if you put it all together, what is the significance that's different than looking at individual places?

LIPTON: The thing that is most striking to me is just the number of places that he, through either contracts or regulatory investigations - that they are looking at him at the same time as he is - now has the power over them. It's the - you know, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Interior, the Federal Aviation Administration, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, the Employment - you know, EEOC, NLRB, the FEC, the SEC. I mean, there are so many acronyms, so many places that either are regulating him or are paying him, at the same time as he has this immense power to help decide what their regulatory powers and budgets are. It's just - how does one single person do all those things without having a massive conflict of interest?

GROSS: I know you don't cover the courts, but some of the lawsuits that have been filed to try to stop Musk from following through on all of the cuts that he's making - some of those are likely to end up before the Supreme Court. There are several justices who consider themselves originalists, meaning that they either take a literal reading of the Constitution or their goal is to try to interpret the Constitution as closely as the founders would. So one of the basics of the Constitution is that Congress has powers of the purse. And another is the separation of powers and the - you know, the equal branches of government - Congress, judiciary and executive. And now the Trump administration seems to be saying, well, we have the power. The courts can't stop us. So do you have any idea - like, any guesses how the Supreme Court might rule on any of these appeals?

LIPTON: If you look at the first Trump administration and then went into Biden, it's really striking, the extent of the pendulum swing. I mean, so many of the regulatory rollbacks that Trump implemented were then rolled back by Biden. The thing that really is going to make - determine the course of history is what the courts decide now. Because if the courts side with Trump and realign the constitutional powers in a way that Russell Vought and others in

the Trump administration believe, then that really is going to create - it's not going to be a pendulum swing anymore. It's going to be a fundamental change in the distribution of power in the United States.

And all of these lawsuits, while they're annoying to the Trump administration and to Elon Musk, that's where the test is really going to come. And who knows how the court is going to decide? You know, it's really sort of hard to predict. But what I can say is that that's the thing that really is going to determine how consequential all of this is, because it could be - many of these things can be rolled back in - whenever the next Democratic administration is. But if the courts decide that the executive branch really has these broad powers to decide the finances and the operations of federal agencies are, that's huge. And it will be tested some point in the next four years.

GROSS: Eric Lipton, I really want to thank you.

LIPTON: Thank you.

GROSS: Eric Lipton is an investigative reporter at The New York Times. Our interview was recorded yesterday. After we take a short break, I'll talk with Theodore Schleifer about how Musk became so powerful in the Trump administration and how Musk's political views shifted to the right. He covers the intersection of Silicon Valley and politics for The New York Times. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF JAY-Z SONG, "03' BONNIE & CLYDE (FEAT. BEYONCE KNOWLES)")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency are reshaping the federal government, inserting themselves into departments and agencies with the goal of drastically slashing costs and cutting jobs. Musk isn't the only tech billionaire that's a player now in the Trump administration. My guest, New York Times reporter Theodore Schleifer, says those tech leaders are emboldened, and they have their fingerprints all over the second Trump administration. What does this say about the influence of Silicon Valley's ultrawealthy on our current government? The intersection between Silicon Valley and politics is a subject

Schleifer has been reporting on for years. His Times bio describes him as covering billionaires and their impact on the world.

Theodore Schleifer, welcome to FRESH AIR. I'm wondering, has Musk always wanted to have a hand in reshaping government?

THEODORE SCHLEIFER: No. Elon Musk a couple of years ago couldn't care less about this stuff. He was like lots of wealthy tech executives, who, you know, probably voted for Democrats. You know, we know he voted for Obama. He voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016. And over the last couple of years, as Elon Musk moved to Texas and surrounded himself with a more conservative social circle and, frankly, got kind of radicalized by the stuff that he was seeing on the platform he bought, Twitter, or now X, he started caring about this. But this has all been such a fast burn that your question is a good one because no one really anticipated this happening.

GROSS: But, you know, like, he has tweeted or retweeted conspiracy theories. He's endorsing the far-right party in Germany. He's aligned with the far-right in the U.S. now. Is there more of an explanation of how that started happening, assuming it's something relatively new?

SCHLEIFER: I think the timeline starts during COVID. Elon Musk at this time, let's say pre-COVID, in 2019, is somebody who is a center-left Democrat, doesn't really care about politics. But what happens is Musk begins to feel targeted, fairly or not, by legislators in California. As you may recall, there were work stoppages put into place by California government, and Tesla's factories were sort of defying or threatening to defy California about that. Around this time in 2021, like lots of wealthy people in tech, Elon leaves the state. He moves to Texas. He moves to Austin. And he becomes very, very convinced that COVID and the lockdowns and what he calls the, quote-unquote, "woke mind virus" has taken over America.

And also around this time, Elon Musk has a child who begins to identify as trans, and there's a personal dimension to this that we probably haven't fully appreciated. And suddenly, you wake up four years later, and Elon Musk is the chair of the Department of Government Efficiency and is sort of leading this takeover of government. But I think the timeline we're talking about here is

really the last four years. It's really the Biden years which has produced Elon Musk of the Trump years.

GROSS: Tell us more about the personal story you alluded to.

SCHLEIFER: Sure. Elon Musk has a lot of kids. Elon has, you know, had a lot of marriages or had kids with women who are not his wife. And one of his children began to identify as trans. And Elon has said publicly, you know, that this issue, trans issues, is really what kind of pushed him away from the Democratic Party. And, you know, he's talked a little bit about it publicly. He doesn't always want to go into the personal stuff. I find in some of his public commentary, he's not eager to talk about this, but we know that it played some role in kind of him becoming obsessed with these kind of cultural issues, right?

You know, this is not somebody who, even though he's in charge of a government cost-cutting initiative, which sounds like, you know, the boring Paul Ryan, Mitt Romney stuff of a decade ago, when you look at his Twitter feed, his X feed, he cares primarily about these sort of issues - crime, immigration, the woke mind virus that is infecting American kids. He's motivated, like all of us are, frankly, by our personal experiences. And clearly, Elon's family life has played a role as well in sort of getting him to be more conservative.

GROSS: So do you think he sees his trans child as a victim of woke ideology?

SCHLEIFER: I think he's basically said as much. Yes.

GROSS: So is Elon Musk a one off, or do you think that a lot of the Silicon Valley billionaires have become more conservative, have drifted more to the right in recent years?

SCHLEIFER: This is just the culmination of everything that came during the Biden era. When I moved to Silicon Valley in 2017, it was impossible to be an outspoken Republican because you would be allying yourself with Trump, and even if you were, you know, a believer that, you know, there should be tougher border enforcement or that the government spends too much money or anything that a Musk says today, you would also have to defend all of these positions that were absolutely reviled in the tech industry. So most

Republicans in tech frankly just shut up. They didn't talk about politics at all. They talked about their companies. They were not eager to get involved. Meanwhile, Silicon Valley liberal billionaires are sort of the war chest of the resistance, and they're leading the effort to push back on Trump. Now fast-forward to 2020. Joe Biden wins. Trump leaves office. Jan. 6 happens. Now there is the ability, developing slowly, you know, at the time I'm there - 2021, 2022 - to be anti-Biden. Even if you are not really vocally pro-Trump, you know, you could argue that we should have different Republican nominees, you know, like, Ron DeSantis, who were getting a lot of currency among Silicon Valley Republican billionaires.

Elon Musk was not that involved right at this point, but plenty of kind of Musk acolytes, someone like David Sacks, who is now the White House AI czar. At the time, David Sacks helps launch this podcast call "All-In," which becomes very popular among the tech right. And you see it anecdotally. You know, I'm there talking with kind of people I think of a - center-left kind of rich liberals who are beginning, you know, to wonder, why is Joe Biden so antibusiness? You know, why didn't he invite Tesla to, you know, an EV summit that he held at the White House. You see this visceral reaction to kind of the Biden positions on tech policy. You know, why is he stifling innovation, stifling artificial intelligence? Why is he being so mean to all these crypto industry priorities? That is kind of the climate that Elon Musk begins to emerge from.

Elon in 2023 was supporting Ron DeSantis, somewhat covertly, for president. And It wasn't until, you know, the assassination attempt in mid-2024 that Elon was publicly pro-Trump, but a lot had building up between 2021 and 2024 that is - now we're only seeing publicly in the Trump White House in 2025, but this was a long time coming, I guess.

GROSS: So one of the things happening now with Musk, or at least it's happening now as we record this Tuesday morning, he's leading a group of investors who are trying to execute a hostile takeover of a nonprofit that controls the artificial intelligence company OpenAI. And that's the company behind ChatGPT. It's headed by Sam Altman. Musk had been involved with this group early on. So whatever this is about, I'm just wondering, like, if Elon Musk

has some control over this huge AI company. I know Elon Musk is working on his own AI company, but it's not as developed as OpenAI is. Correct me if I'm wrong.

SCHLEIFER: Yeah.

GROSS: But if someone like Musk, who has endorsed conspiracy theories and is far-right now in some of his politics - if he takes over, or him and the consortium take over a really major AI company, and if they feed it the things that Musk believes now, certain conspiracy theories - if that gets into AI as fact, what would that mean? And am I just interpreting this all wrong?

SCHLEIFER: Yeah. I mean, look - Elon is an interesting person on AI, where he has all those beliefs, you know, personally about the world and culture and politics. And he also has beliefs that I think would be contradictory to some of kind of the rightward shifts of the artificial intelligence industry, where Elon Musk is actually very concerned about AI. You know, he's signed a lot of public letters urging there to be AI safety. And he's concerned about the company OpenAI being too commercialized, and sort of he's concerned about this jump from a nonprofit to a for-profit company. So he does not have conventional beliefs of kind of the right here, which is, in general, you know, more pro-technology development and pro - frankly, just profit motive. Musk has some deeply concern and, frankly, pretty long-held beliefs that AI could be a problem. So he does not fit neatly into a box on this issue.

GROSS: So do you see liberal billionaires trying to put money to stop with the conservative - like, how are the liberal billionaires reacting to all of the very conservative billionaires that are embedded, in one way or another, in the Trump administration?

SCHLEIFER: Liberal billionaires have really been MIA, Terry. I mean, we - it's been very hard to see sort of any leadership from wealthy Democrats about what exactly their plan is to take on Trump. They're not really saying much of anything. I mean, some wealthy Harris donors have adopted some of that kind of "Kumbaya" messaging, where they're trying to support the new president. Other people have been kind of in a daze. Reid Hoffman, for instance - who's kind of one of the leading liberal donors - I reported a few months ago was

telling friends that he was considering leaving the United States entirely. I think lots of these wealthy Democrats legitimately feel they could be targets of persecution or - you know, from a Trump-led FBI, or that their businesses could get special attention. And the sense from wealthy Democrats is they should just lay low, so that's sort of happening right now.

You know, we've seen the beginnings of kind of conversations, or the concepts of conversations, about how exactly they should spend their money to resist Trump. But right now, it is not a time for a wealthy Democrat to feel like they can speak out about Trump. And, you know, that's why you're not really seeing much publicly. Privately, you know, wealthy Democratic donors I talk to are still sort of in blame-game mode a little bit. Like, they're still trying to understand how Harris lost, exactly. They're still, you know, facing questions about, should they have been more vocal about Joe Biden in 2024? And 2028 is, of course, a really, really long time away, so we're not really seeing much leadership from them.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Theodore Schleifer. And he's a reporter for The New York Times who covers, among other things, the intersection of Silicon Valley and Washington politics. We'll be right back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF DJ BLACK COWL'S "DUCENTUM")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Teddy Schleifer at The New York Times, who has been covering the intersection of the Silicon Valley and Washington politics and lately has been focusing on Elon Musk and other tech billionaires and their roles in - and influence on - the Trump administration.

As you've pointed out, there isn't a lot of transparency in what Musk is doing in terms of job and cost-cutting. And he has said secrecy is necessary to the team of young people who he has carrying out his orders at departments and agencies. Russell Vought, who's the new head of the Office of Management and Budget, said, we want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains. And Trump, for years, has

been calling, for instance, the press the enemy of the people. And Musk has accused USAID of being a criminal organization and said, time for it to die. Does that seem a little unusual - that Musk could say, oh, we just don't want to make our own people targets, when some of the Trump administration people have really put targets on the back of so many people?

SCHLEIFER: Sure. I mean, this is a war, in Elon Musk's view, a war on the bureaucracy, and there's no Geneva Convention for this war. There are no beliefs from the Musk team that they have to be fair or believe that, you know, they're required to disclose the names of their generals, even as they kind of go after the other generals. I mean, we've seen the Musk team - I'm exaggerating for dramatic effect there a little bit, but, you know, they genuinely believe that they are in hand-to-hand combat with a bureaucracy that wants to kill them, right?

I mean, for instance, there's - at these agencies right now, there's an intense resistance to kind of giving the Musk team what they want because they think the Musk team wants to, you know, attack them. And so we just have, right now, a - you know, a very, very, very intense personal fight between rank-and-file bureaucrats and these kind of 23-year-old Elon Musk acolytes. 23-year-old Elon Musk acolytes who are fighting over, you know, whether or not they get access to this Medicaid system or this HR payroll or yada, yada, yada.

GROSS: So one of the big concerns is that Musk's team has wanted access to the Treasury Department's payment system. And the Treasury...

SCHLEIFER: Yeah.

GROSS: ...Department disperses about \$5 trillion in funding, and it has everybody's sensitive information in there. How far has the Musk team gotten in their attempt to get into the payment system?

SCHLEIFER: Pretty far. You know, the Musk team has been sort of fighting the bureaucracy of the Treasury Department over what sort of access they could get to the payment system. But as of now, you know, the Elon team and the Treasury team are sort of trying to find a middle ground, and the courts are trying to kind of enforce a middle ground to make sure that everyone is peachy with the arrangement. You know, I think at first, the Musk team, which



is led by this guy named Tom Krause, who's an executive from Silicon Valley, who recently was appointed to a top position at the Treasury Department. They're trying to have what's called read-only access to that \$5 trillion in payments. Essentially, what that would mean would be that the Musk team and Krause could read kind of all payments that go out to make sure that they're complying with Trump's executive orders. You know, Elon has said publicly he wants to make sure that we're reading things, like, to make sure that no money is going out to terrorists from Treasury. But the concern, especially for people who believe in the separation of powers, is that this could be a way for Musk to essentially unilaterally decide to stop payments to things that have been authorized by Congress. That if you suddenly have the ability to read Treasury payments as they're going out the door, couldn't Musk somehow find a way to, hey, we shouldn't spend the money on, you know, this thing or that thing, let's cut \$20 trillion right here, this \$30 trillion right there, and suddenly, that makes Elon Musk more powerful than Congress. And that sort of is the concern, and that's why this pretty technical distinction over read-only access versus kind of a more expansive power when it comes to Treasury's code, that's why that matters is because it tells you whether or not Elon Musk can just kind of read the book or write the book.

GROSS: The U.S. Digital Service is now renamed the U.S. DOGE Service. And it was established in 2014 to fix the federal government's online services. What can you tell us about this service and what it means that it's now renamed with the DOGE brand?

SCHLEIFER: So the U.S. Digital Service was started during the second Obama term as a way to get more technologists into government, and it largely was doing things like, you know, pushing for making it easier to file your tax returns online or, you know, updating government websites, things that were pretty non-controversial. But it was established and it was an existing department, and I think they had somewhere around 200 employees all around government sort of being detailed to various tasks. DOGE, which originally was conceived of as an outside entity, sort of jiu-jitsu-ed (ph) its way into working as a successor organization sort of to the USDS - to the U.S.

Digital Service. They just kept it called the United States DOGE Service now instead. And essentially, what that enables the DOGE team to do is they, you know, don't need to create a new office. They're just kind of taking over the existing office. And they have now put all of their detailees into DOGE and into the USDS, and they are now farmed out across various agencies, you know, including the Office of Personnel Management, which oversees kind of the Civil Service or the General Services Administration, the GSA, which kind of manages government real estate. But all these people technically work for the USDS. And it was a pretty clever way to get in the front door of the bureaucracy by sort of taking a similar-ish institution that already existed and repurposing it for Musk's purposes.

GROSS: Let's take another break here, and then we'll talk some more.

If you're just joining us, my guest is New York Times Reporter Teddy Schleifer.

We'll be right back after a short break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF ANORAAK SONG, "HERE YOU GO")

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. Let's get back to my interview with Theodore Schleifer, a New York Times reporter who's been covering the intersection of the Silicon Valley and Washington politics and lately has been focusing on Elon Musk and other tech billionaires and their roles in and influence on the Trump administration.

One of your articles was about investigating who are the people working with Musk on DOGE, the young people who are going into agencies and departments and trying to lay off people and - or fire them and cut costs. What are some of the things you were able to learn about who they are and how they're being selected?

SCHLEIFER: There is about 40 of these people, we think, who are working for DOGE...

GROSS: That's funny, I assumed there were more 'cause there's so many agencies and departments that they're working on.

SCHLEIFER: Yeah, but you can be working at 26 different agencies before breakfast. You know, a lot of these folks have multiple jobs simultaneously, multiple detail assignments simultaneously, and they sort of jump from, you

know, DHS to, you know, the education department, depending on how the mood strikes them. I think we're focusing a lot on the kind of the kids, as we call them, even though there are, like, official, normal, Washington types who are involved in this. I don't want to overstate it. There are also a good amount of people who are involved who are sort of just Elon friends who are maybe in unofficial capacities. Various people from Musk's social network are sort of involved. You know, Marc Andreessen has called himself an unpaid intern to DOGE - the billionaire venture capitalist. You know, I think what their work is - what they're doing is pretty novel, obviously, and they're getting into lots of fights with the bureaucracy in a way that befits sort of the Silicon Valley mindset of disruption, right? That's the nice way to put it. They are not believing that they need to go through the standard bureaucratic process of establishing a commission to investigate a task force to blah, blah, blah. They just want to go in and do it. A lot of the people involved share Musk's distaste and disdain for the status quo. I think we're seeing a lot of these people who have come in who have worked for Elon Musk in some capacity. You know, they're all kind of in Musk's image. And he's a, you know - he's a very, very divisive, polarizing leader. But there are people that surround Elon Musk - have kind of a cultish devotion to him. I mean, I think that we're seeing - the reason these people are getting involved in DOGE is because they love Elon Musk, and they will do what Elon Musk tells them to do. And that's why they followed him to Washington, D.C.

GROSS: When we talk about, like, spending in Washington politics or political power in terms of private enterprise, it was always about corporations. And now you're specializing in writing about billionaires...

SCHLEIFER: Yeah.

GROSS: ...Who own corporations - multiple corporations, in the case of Elon Musk. So do you think the balance of power has kind of switched to individuals, as opposed to companies?

SCHLEIFER: Certainly, post-Citizens United, you know, there's been this ability of individuals to spend unlimited money on political campaigns. And that has empowered wealthy people, as opposed to wealthy corporations, which, you

know, have always been very, very influential in Washington, right? I mean, they have trade groups. They have lobbyists. They, you know, have donated money to campaigns. And they still can, obviously. But the ability of private individuals I find just a - such an interesting story because they're peculiar, right? They're human beings. They have their own beliefs and their ability to act on them. And they have agency in a way that, some ways, corporations do not because they're risk-averse and, you know, ruled by committee. And as philanthropists, and as donors, and as political givers, and as billionaires, these people are empowered in a way that corporations can feel kind of defanged. They can feel slow. Certainly not true of Musk's corporations, but I love the stories about the people.

GROSS: So a lot of Trump watchers have described Trump as somebody who wants to be the person getting the most attention, whether it's on the media or, you know, in terms of political power. And Musk is getting so much attention now, and you're contributing to that by writing so much - by reporting so much on Musk and his influence in the Trump administration. There was a Time magazine cover where it was Musk at the Resolute desk in the White House. You know, some people are predicting that this relationship can't last long because they both want to be the most powerful person. Do you have any insight into that?

SCHLEIFER: Yeah, I feel like I'm tempted to offer a contrarian opinion - that I just believe it's not going to blow up immediately. Look, the - these are clearly two larger-than-life personalities, to put it mildly. The possibilities of this blowing up need no explanation. I think the reasons why it could not blow up is these are people who are enjoying each other's company, genuinely. You know, I think that they actually do have a good personal relationship at this point. And also, there's PR reasons to not have a blow-up. I think they're both enjoying the perception of access, and the perception of power goes both ways. I think Trump likes having - surrounding himself with someone who knows a lot about things and is able to teach him about certain things. Trump obviously also respects wealth and respects Elon's abilities in the business

world. I find myself thinking it's going to last longer than most people do, I'll tell you that.

GROSS: Teddy Schleifer, thank you so much for talking with us.

SCHLEIFER: You bet.

GROSS: Theodore Schleifer covers the intersection of Silicon Valley and politics and the global influence of billionaires for The New York Times. We recorded the interview yesterday before the Trump-Musk press conference.

Tomorrow on FRESH AIR, our guest will be filmmaker, photographer, professor and writer RaMell Ross. He's nominated for an Oscar for best adapted screenplay for the film "Nickel Boys," which he also directed. The movie is also nominated for best picture. It's about two young Black men in the '60s attempting to survive a brutal reformatory. I hope you'll join us.

(SOUNDBITE OF TERENCE BLANCHARD'S "FOOTPRINTS")

GROSS: Our interviews and reviews are produced and edited by Phyllis Myers, Ann Marie Baldonado, Lauren Krenzel, Therese Madden, Monique Nazareth, Thea Chaloner, Susan Nyakundi, Anna Bauman and Joel Wolfram. Our co-host is Tonya Mosley. I'm Terry Gross.