

# Trump puts new limits on out of control Elon Musk

The president convened his secretaries, with Musk, to clarify power.



Elon Musk salutes the crowd during President Donald Trump's address to a joint session of Congress in the House chamber at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, on March 4, 2025. | Pete Kiehart for POLITICO  
By **DASHA BURNS** and **KYLE CHENEY**

- President Donald Trump convened his Cabinet in person on Thursday to deliver a message: You're in charge of your departments, not Elon Musk.

According to two administration officials, Trump told top members of his administration that Musk was empowered to make recommendations to the departments but not to issue unilateral decisions on staffing and policy. Musk was also in the room.

The meeting followed a series of mass firings and threats to government workers from the billionaire Tesla founder, who helms the Department of Government Efficiency, that created broad uncertainty across the federal government and its workforce.

DOGE's actions have faced ferocious resistance in court and criticism from Democratic lawmakers and some Republicans.

The president's message represents the first significant move to narrow Musk's mandate. According to Trump's new guidance, DOGE and its staff should play an advisory role — but Cabinet secretaries should make final decisions on personnel, policy and the pacing of implementation.

Musk joined the conversation and indicated he was on board with Trump's directive. According to one person familiar with the meeting, Musk acknowledged that DOGE had made some missteps — a message he shared earlier this week with members of Congress.

Trump stressed that he wants to keep good people in government and not to eject capable federal workers en masse. But his administration has in recent weeks fired tens of thousands of federal workers across numerous agencies in a series of blanket terminations. A [federal judge](#) and the [chair of a federal civil service board](#) have both concluded that the terminations were not tied to performance issues — and may have violated civil service laws.

It is unclear whether the new guidance will result in laid off workers getting rehired.

Trump posted about the meeting on Truth Social after this story posted, promising to hold similar meetings every two weeks.

“As the Secretaries learn about, and understand, the people working for the various Departments, they can be very precise as to who will remain, and who will go,” he wrote. “We say the ‘scalpel’ rather than the ‘hatchet.’ The combination of them, Elon, DOGE, and other great people will be able to do things at a historic level.”

Trump's spokesperson, Harrison Fields, said Trump “sets the agenda for the entire administration, and everyone is committed to implementing that mission in a unified fashion.”

The timing of the meeting was influenced by recent comments from Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-S.D.), who said on CNN Tuesday that Cabinet secretaries should retain the full power to hire and fire, according to one official. The official said Trump has been flooded with similar concerns from other lawmakers and Cabinet secretaries.

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The president's admonition to agency heads could impact mounting legal scrutiny facing DOGE.

Judges have increasingly expressed frustration and bewilderment at the Trump administration's inability to explain who is in charge of the bureaucracy-culling effort and whether Musk himself is playing any role in ordering up the steep cuts to programs and jobs. Complicating the matter further, Trump declared during his address to Congress Tuesday that Musk is indeed the "head" of DOGE, a label that immediately reverberated in several of the Musk-focused court cases. Trump's assertion conflicted with the White House's representation in court last month that Musk had no independent authority to make policy decisions.

Judges will now have to decide whether Trump's after-the-fact characterization of Musk's role resolves the already-existing legal challenges to DOGE's work.

It comes just as some of those lawsuits reach a new fact-finding phase that could produce more clarity on the SpaceX boss' involvement in running the government.

A federal judge last week ordered sworn testimony from some DOGE officials and affiliates to more fully understand the group's work. And two lawsuits aimed at stopping Musk himself — one in Washington, D.C., and one in Maryland — are reaching crucial milestones as well. Those lawsuits allege that Musk has been exercising an unconstitutional degree of power for a government official who has not been confirmed by the Senate.