

# 'Tesla Syndrome' Explains Why Musk Is Making Us Miserable

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## 'Tesla Syndrome' Explains Why Musk Is Making Us Miserable

[Throttling of rivals stokes legal concerns...](#)

[Elon blocking users who complain about X...](#)

[America's Tech Giants Rush to Comply With New Rules in Europe...](#)

- [Legal Experts Call For Investigation Into Biden's Favorite Super PAC Over 'Serious' Financial Discrepancies](#)
- [Elon Musk's Twitter/X Seeks Job Applicants To Fill What Critics Call 'Censorship Positions'](#)
- [Rare Earth Elements And National Security: Reclaiming US Control Amid China's Monopoly](#)
- [Wildlife Officials Stunned by Environmental Damage of SPACEX Explosion...](#)

[385-Acre Debris Field; Concrete Flung 2,680 Feet From Launchpad...](#)

A few years ago, my building replaced all of its elevators. I live in lower Manhattan, and the three cars that served our 17-story, full-city-block building were not moving people along fast enough. The new elevators were supposed to solve this, using algorithms. The installation was slow, spread out over the early pandemic, but eventually it was completed (in 2021, I think; pandemic time all runs together). And the elevators are noticeably worse. They often go by you when you call them, they somehow create new chokepoints, and often I find myself taking the stairs up to the 10th floor instead. I call this phenomenon the "Tesla syndrome," and it's a sign of capitalism not working anymore.

There's a class war going on, but it's not the one we usually think about. Owners and managers are fighting, and it's mangling capitalism beyond recognition. Workers are fighting to prevent [jobs from becoming "gigs."](#) But in corporate boardrooms, a less visible and even more disastrous fight is being won by the wealthy. It's led to a situation where we have science fiction aesthetics with diminished functions, like "smart" fridges that [stop cooling after rebooting.](#)

Tesla makes digital cars. It exploits cutting-edge computer vision and deep learning technologies to promise [a driverless experience,](#) and while its cars are not yet reliable enough [to avoid killing people or occasionally run into objects,](#) Elon Musk rode to fame on the promise of a futuristic automobile.

The only problem is that Teslas suck.

Forget the actual digital stuff in those cars. Think about [how they look,](#) the message they send, and the way they're designed in regular old meatspace. They're ugly, like a third-rate graphic designer was asked to imagine what a "science fiction car" looks like and given some copies of [Amazing Stories!](#) From the 1950s. Their uber-large screens are digital, but the size and placement is a design decision, and it's a notoriously bad one. They're distracting, and they don't ultimately serve the underlying self-driving function. (Car manufacturers more generally [are pulling back from the all-digital approach to the dash.](#))

And then there are the *handles*. Tesla door handles are flush with the side of the car—genius! Except that this is the opposite of the vaunted efficiency and optimization these cars stand for. You have to *tap the handle* first, and only then can you use it. This contradicts the very idea of the handle, a technology so old we barely think of it as a technology at all. It's hard to understand how we got to a place where "efficiency" is adding an extra step to using a car door handle.

This situation is the Tesla syndrome, and it's everywhere. "Innovation" all too often makes everything worse. Ubers are [often more expensive than taxis now.](#) Streaming services that once offered us infinite movies [now force us all to watch Suits.](#) Information markets that were supposed to distribute goods and money more equitably by means of the market alone have led to [unprecedented inequality.](#) Management consultants using the "Innovation Bible" have suggested that a major university [replace all its language classes with subscriptions to Duolingo.](#) Twitter is now "X." Tweets are now "posts."

Tesla didn't cause any of this on its own. But it is the poster child for the slick substitution of actual functionality for nebulous "innovation"; the replacement of products and services that really work, with sleek but dysfunctional machines, "master algorithms," and corporate boardrooms. The French philosopher Jacques Ellul famously argued that at the heart of technology is the desire to maximize efficiency—to find the shortest route to accomplishing a given task. Tesla, and Big Tech more generally, have betrayed this spirit by hollowing out actual valuable uses of technology in favor of science fiction aesthetics.

"It's the 21st century, and in the era of "platform capitalism" a major front of class warfare is in the boardroom."

Musk personifies the problem. As he started [to comically screw up Twitter](#) (now rebranded as X), he was pressured into hiring a CEO, Linda Yaccarino. But he's still in charge, and [doesn't think CEOs are really that important anyway.](#) His behavior is not just idiosyncratic; wealth and ownership are winning the day over companies and entrepreneurs. This is the secret of the Tesla syndrome.

The term "class warfare" conjures images of Karl Marx's beard, workers leaving the factory or on the picket line, and bosses fighting to keep them in line. Our image of class and its problems has remained firmly rooted in the 19th century, in other words. But it's the 21st century, and in the era of ["platform capitalism"](#) a major front of class warfare is in the boardroom.

Nowhere can we see this truth distilled more clearly than in [Silicon Valley](#), cult-hit HBO comedy. Protagonist Richard Hendricks is a computer genius who starts a company. But his rise to corporate juggernaut is mostly about fighting to remain in control. Venture capitalists, who supply the wealth, try over and over again to force him to let someone else be CEO. Stephen Tobolowski shines as the comically out-of-touch executive in one season, underscoring the point that the guy with the idea, the guy with the (eventual) money, and the guy who manages everything should all be the same guy: Richard Hendricks, or Elon Musk.

But these "guys" are supposed to be separate for capitalism to function. If you have a billion dollars and you put 10 million into a start-up on the promise of getting 100 million back in five years, that's not capitalism. That's a side effect of capitalism, called wealth. Capitalism is when the object of enterprise is the expansion of capital. *Wealth* is not the same thing as capital. When I get money and take it out of the market, saving it, investing it, or spending it on my personal affairs, I'm engaged as a consumer and a beneficiary of capitalist markets, but I'm not a "capitalist." The capitalist—the "boss" of the 19th century class warfare—is the guy who runs the factory floor. That's not the same as the owner, who sits back and watches his investment grow.

For two centuries, wealth and capital got along. But capital has to be in constant circulation for capitalism to work, and companies have to be run with that in mind. When the owner class takes over, everything gets worse. That's what's going on with Tesla, and much else besides.

*Silicon Valley* wasn't just fiction. The two roles—capitalist and Rich Guy—are united in Musk in the worst possible way. Musk runs his companies as an *owner*, not a manager. The owners are beating the managers in the 21st century class war. *This is why we can't have nice things.*

And we see the larger effects play off each other as a contrast with another of the wealthiest men in the world: Jeff Bezos. Bezos was *the boss—the CEO—for* a couple of decades in our collective imagination. But since he stepped down, we can see that he's something else entirely. He's an island of wealth. When he resigned the CEO position to try to [colonize the moon](#) or whatever, we could see the two roles split off from each other. Narratives about "job creation" pale in comparison to the new set of Howard Hugheses. NFL owners are [increasingly heavy-handed in managing teams.](#) University boards of trustees override decisions by presidents and chancellors. Wealth lurks around every corner, ready to stall capital if it happens to flow away from that wealth.

My point is not that we should return to classical capitalism, which had its own problems, as Marx was first to point out. But Marx also saw that ownership threatened the parts of capitalism that he—yes, Karl Marx—saw as progressive. Wealth congealing rather than circulating was "miserly," as he put it, and capital was instead about constant turnover and change—what we now call "innovation." (Yes, I'm saying Karl Marx was the first theorist of capitalist innovation. Fight me.) The common ownership he advocated—communism—is being enacted for the .0001 percent, and it is destroying the relative benefits of "market economics." What we have today is not innovation at all, but what media theorist Wendy Chun calls ["updating to remain the same."](#) Or even "updating to get worse," like the elevators in my building.

It's been easy to overlook the rise of the owners. But increasingly, our world is only as good as their wisdom. Some have suggested that [tech returns us to a feudal state,](#) and nowhere is this more literal than when our social fabric is determined by the mood of a single owner, a platform version of the king. It just so happens that the current crop of kings are toxic nerds [trying to have fistfights with each other](#) rather than fix the world's problems, many of which they created. At this point, we'd probably compromise if they'd just put a normal door handle on our cars.

The post ["Tesla Syndrome" Explains Why Tech Is Making Us Miserable](#) appeared first on [The Daily Beast.](#)  
**How the U.S. government came to rely on the tech billionaire—and is now struggling to rein him in.**

By [Ronan Farrow](#)

ast October, Colin Kahl, then the Under-Secretary of Defense for Policy at the Pentagon, sat in a hotel in Paris and prepared to make a call to avert disaster in Ukraine. A staffer handed him an iPhone—in part to avoid inviting an onslaught of late-night texts and colorful emojis on Kahl's own phone. Kahl had returned to his room, with its heavy drapery and distant view of the Eiffel Tower, after a day of meetings with officials from the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. A senior defense official told me that Kahl was surprised by whom he was about to contact: "He was, like, 'Why am I calling Elon Musk?'"

The reason soon became apparent. "Even though Musk is not technically a diplomat or statesman, I felt it was important to treat him as such, given the influence he had on this issue," Kahl told me. SpaceX, Musk's space-exploration company, had for months been providing Internet access across Ukraine, allowing the country's forces to plan attacks and to defend themselves. But, in recent days, the forces had found their connectivity severed as they entered territory contested by Russia. More alarmingly, SpaceX had recently given the Pentagon an ultimatum: if it didn't assume the cost of providing service in Ukraine, which the company calculated at some four hundred million dollars annually, it would cut off access. "We started to get a little panicked," the senior defense official, one of four who described the standoff to me, recalled. Musk "could turn it off at any given moment. And that would have real operational impact for the Ukrainians."

Musk had become involved in the war in Ukraine soon after Russia invaded, in February, 2022. Along with conventional assaults, the Kremlin was conducting cyberattacks against Ukraine's digital infrastructure. Ukrainian officials and a

loose coalition of expatriates in the tech sector, brainstorming in group chats on WhatsApp and Signal, found a potential solution: SpaceX, which manufactures a line of mobile Internet terminals called Starlink. The tripod-mounted dishes, each about the size of a computer display and clad in white plastic reminiscent of the sleek design sensibility of Musk's Tesla electric cars, connect with a network of satellites. The units have limited range, but in this situation that was an advantage: although a nationwide network of dishes was required, it would be difficult for Russia to completely dismantle Ukrainian connectivity. Of course, Musk could do so. Three people involved in bringing Starlink to Ukraine, all of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity because they worried that Musk, if upset, could withdraw his services, told me that they originally overlooked the significance of his personal control. "Nobody thought about it back then," one of them, a Ukrainian tech executive, told me. "It was all about 'Let's fucking go, people are dying.'"

In the ensuing months, fund-raising in Silicon Valley's Ukrainian community, contracts with the U.S. Agency for International Development and with European governments, and pro-bono contributions from SpaceX facilitated the transfer of thousands of Starlink units to Ukraine. A soldier in Ukraine's signal corps who was responsible for maintaining Starlink access on the front lines, and who asked to be identified only by his first name, Mykola, told me, "It's the essential backbone of communication on the battlefield."

Initially, Musk showed unreserved support for the Ukrainian cause, responding encouragingly as Mykhailo Fedorov, the Ukrainian minister for digital transformation, tweeted pictures of equipment in the field. But, as the war ground on, SpaceX began to balk at the cost. "We are not in a position to further donate terminals to Ukraine, or fund the existing terminals for an indefinite period of time," SpaceX's director of government sales told the Pentagon in a letter, last September. (CNBC recently valued SpaceX at nearly a hundred and fifty billion dollars. *Forbes* estimated Musk's personal net worth at two hundred and twenty billion dollars, making him the world's richest man.)

Musk was also growing increasingly uneasy with the fact that his technology was being used for warfare. That month, at a conference in Aspen attended by business and political figures, Musk even appeared to express support for Vladimir Putin. "He was onstage, and he said, 'We should be negotiating. Putin wants peace—we should be negotiating peace with Putin,'" Reid Hoffman, who helped start PayPal with Musk, recalled. Musk seemed, he said, to have "bought what Putin was selling, hook, line, and sinker." A week later, Musk tweeted a proposal for his own peace plan, which called for new referendums to redraw the borders of Ukraine, and granted Russia control of Crimea, the semi-autonomous peninsula recognized by most nations, including the United States, as Ukrainian territory. In later tweets, Musk portrayed as inevitable an outcome favoring Russia and attached maps highlighting eastern Ukrainian territories, some of which, he argued, "prefer Russia." Musk also polled his Twitter followers about the plan. Millions responded, with about sixty per cent rejecting the proposal. (Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's President, tweeted his own poll, asking users whether they preferred the Elon Musk who supported Ukraine or the one who now seemed to back Russia. The former won, though Zelensky's poll had a smaller turnout: Musk has more than twenty times as many followers.)

By then, Musk's sympathies appeared to be manifesting on the battlefield. One day, Ukrainian forces advancing into contested areas in the south found themselves suddenly unable to communicate. "We were very close to the front line," Mykola, the signal-corps soldier, told me. "We crossed this border and the Starlink stopped working." The consequences were immediate. "Communications became dead, units were isolated. When you're on offense, especially for commanders, you need a constant stream of information from battalions. Commanders had to drive to the battlefield to be in radio range, risking themselves," Mykola said. "It was chaos." Ukrainian expats who had raised funds for the Starlink units began receiving frantic calls. The tech executive recalls a Ukrainian military official telling him, "We need Elon now." "How now?" he replied. "Like fucking now," the official said. "People are dying." Another Ukrainian involved told me that he was "awakened by a dozen calls saying they'd lost connectivity and had to retreat." *The Financial Times* reported that outages affected units in Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Kharkiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk. American and Ukrainian officials told me they believed that SpaceX had cut the connectivity via geofencing, cordoning off areas of access.

The senior defense official said, "We had a whole series of meetings internal to the department to try to figure out what we could do about this." Musk's singular role presented unfamiliar challenges, as did the government's role as intermediary. "It wasn't like we could hold him in breach of contract or something," the official continued. The Pentagon would need to reach a contractual arrangement with SpaceX so that, at the very least, Musk "couldn't wake up one morning and just decide, like, he didn't want to do this anymore." Kahl added, "It was kind of a way for us to lock in services across Ukraine. It could at least prevent Musk from turning off the switch altogether."

Typically, such a negotiation would be handled by the Pentagon's acquisitions department. But Musk had become more than just a vendor like Boeing, Lockheed, or other defense-industry behemoths. On the phone with Musk from Paris, Kahl was deferential. According to unclassified talking points for the call, he thanked Musk for his efforts in Ukraine, acknowledged the steep costs he'd incurred, and pleaded for even a few weeks to devise a contract. "If you cut this off, it doesn't end the war," Kahl recalled telling Musk.

Musk wasn't immediately convinced. "My inference was that he was getting nervous that Starlink's involvement was increasingly seen in Russia as enabling the Ukrainian war effort, and was looking for a way to placate Russian concerns," Kahl told me. To the dismay of Pentagon officials, Musk volunteered that he had spoken with Putin personally. Another individual told me that Musk had made the same assertion in the weeks before he tweeted his pro-Russia peace plan, and had said that his consultations with the Kremlin were regular. (Musk later denied having spoken with Putin about Ukraine.) On the phone, Musk said that he was looking at his laptop and could see "the entire war unfolding" through a map of Starlink activity. "This was, like, three minutes before he said, 'Well, I had this great conversation with Putin,'" the senior defense official told me. "And we were, like, 'Oh, dear, this is not good.'" Musk told Kahl that the vivid illustration of how technology he had designed for peaceful ends was being used to wage war gave him pause.

After a fifteen-minute call, Musk agreed to give the Pentagon more time. He also, after public blowback and with evident annoyance, walked back his threats to cut off service. "The hell with it," he tweeted. "Even though Starlink is still losing money & other companies are getting billions of taxpayer \$, we'll just keep funding Ukraine govt for free." This June, the Department of Defense announced that it had reached a deal with SpaceX.

The meddling of oligarchs and other monied interests in the fate of nations is not new. During the First World War, J. P. Morgan lent vast sums to the Allied powers; afterward, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., poured money into the fledgling League of Nations. The investor George Soros's Open Society Foundations underwrote civil-society reform in post-Soviet Europe, and the casino mogul Sheldon Adelson funded right-wing media in Israel, as part of his support of Benjamin Netanyahu.

But Musk's influence is more brazen and expansive. There is little precedent for a civilian's becoming the arbiter of a war between nations in such a granular way, or for the degree of dependency that the U.S. now has on Musk in a variety of fields, from the future of energy and transportation to the exploration of space. SpaceX is currently the sole means by which *nasa* transports crew from U.S. soil into space, a situation that will persist for at least another year. The government's plan to move the auto industry toward electric cars requires increasing access to charging stations along America's highways. But this rests on the actions of another Musk enterprise, Tesla. The automaker has seeded so much of the country with its proprietary charging stations that the Biden Administration relaxed an early push for a universal charging standard disliked by Musk. His stations are eligible for billions of dollars in subsidies, so long as Tesla makes them compatible with the other charging standard.

In the past twenty years, against a backdrop of crumbling infrastructure and declining trust in institutions, Musk has sought out business opportunities in crucial areas where, after decades of privatization, the state has receded. The government is now reliant on him, but struggles to respond to his risk-taking, brinkmanship, and caprice. Current and former officials from *nasa*, the Department of Defense, the Department of Transportation, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration told me that Musk's influence had become inescapable in their work, and several of them said that they now treat him like a sort of unelected official. One Pentagon spokesman said that he was keeping Musk apprised of my inquiries about his role in Ukraine and would grant an interview with an official about the matter only with Musk's permission. "We'll talk to you if Elon wants us to," he told me. In a podcast interview last year, Musk was asked whether he has more influence than the American government. He replied immediately, "In some ways." Reid Hoffman told me that Musk's attitude is "like Louis XIV: 'L'état, c'est moi.'"

Musk's power continues to grow. His takeover of Twitter, which he has rebranded "X," gives him a critical forum for political discourse ahead of the next Presidential election. He recently launched an artificial-intelligence company, a move that follows years of involvement in the technology. Musk has become a hyper-exposed pop-culture figure, and his sharp turns from altruistic to vainglorious, strategic to impulsive, have been the subject of innumerable articles and at least seven major books, including a forthcoming biography by Walter Isaacson. But the nature and the scope of his power are less widely understood.

More than thirty of Musk's current and former colleagues in various industries and a dozen individuals in his personal life spoke to me about their experiences with him. Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, with whom Musk has both worked and sparred, told me, "Elon desperately wants the world to be saved. But only if he can be the one to save it."

The terms of the Starlink deal have not been made public. Ukrainian officials say that they have not faced further service interruptions. But Musk has continued to express ambivalence about how the technology is being used, and where it can be deployed. In February, he tweeted, "We will not enable escalation of conflict that may lead to WW3." He said, as he had told Kahl, that he was sincerely attempting to navigate the moral dilemmas of his role: "We're trying hard to do the right thing, where the 'right thing' is an extremely difficult moral question."

Musk's hesitation aligns with his pragmatic interests. A facility in Shanghai produces half of all Tesla cars, and Musk depends on the good will of officials in China, which has lent support to Russia in the conflict. Musk recently acknowledged to the *Financial Times* that Beijing disapproves of his decision to provide Internet service to Ukraine and has sought assurances that he would not deploy similar technology in China. In the same interview, he responded to

questions about China's efforts to assert control over Taiwan by floating another peace plan. Taiwan, he suggested, could become a jointly controlled administrative zone, an outcome that Taiwanese leaders see as ending the country's independence. During a trip to Beijing this spring, Musk was welcomed with what Reuters summarized as "flattery and feasts." He met with senior officials, including China's foreign minister, and posed for the kinds of awkwardly smiling formal photos that are more typical of world leaders.

National-security officials I spoke with had a range of views on the government's balance of power with Musk. He maintains good relationships with some of them, including General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Since the two men met, several years ago, when Milley was the chief of staff of the Army, they have discussed "technology applications to warfare—artificial intelligence, electric vehicles, and autonomous machines," Milley told me. "He has insight that helped shape my thoughts on the fundamental change in the character of war and the modernization of the U.S. military." During the Starlink controversy, Musk called him for advice. But other officials expressed profound misgivings. "Living in the world we live in, in which Elon runs this company and it is a private business under his control, we are living off his good graces," a Pentagon official told me. "That sucks."

One summer evening in the mid-nineteen-eighties, Musk and his friend Theo Taoushiani took Taoushiani's father's car for an illicit drive. Musk and Taoushiani were both in their mid-teens, and lived about a mile apart in a suburb of Johannesburg, South Africa. Neither had a driver's license, or permission from Taoushiani's father. But they were passionate Dungeons & Dragons fans, and a new module—a fresh scenario in the game—had just been released. Taoushiani took the wheel for the twenty-minute drive to the Sandton City mall. "Elon was my co-pilot," Taoushiani told me. "We went under the cover of darkness." At the mall, they found that they didn't have enough money. But Musk promised a salesperson that they would return the next day with the rest, and dropped the name of a well-known Greek restaurant owned by Taoushiani's family. "Elon had the gift of the gab," Taoushiani said. "He's very persuasive, and he's quite dogged in his determination." The two went home with the module.

Musk was born in 1971 in Pretoria, the country's administrative capital, and he and his younger brother, Kimbal, and his younger sister, Tosca, grew up under apartheid. Musk's mother, Maye, a Canadian model and dietitian, and his father, Errol, an engineer, divorced when he was young, and the children initially stayed with Maye. She has said that Errol was physically abusive toward her. "He would hit me when the kids were around," she wrote in her memoir. "I remember that Tosca and Kimbal, who were two and four, respectively, would cry in the corner, and Elon, who was five, would hit him on the backs of his knees to try to stop him." By the mid-eighties, Musk had moved in with his father—a decision that he has said was motivated by concern for his father's loneliness, and which he came to regret. Musk, usually impassive in interviews, cried openly when he told *Rolling Stone* about the years that followed, in which, he said, his father psychologically tortured him, in ways that he declined to specify. "You have no idea about how bad," he said. "Almost every crime you can possibly think of, he has done. Almost every evil thing you could possibly think of, he has done." Taoushiani recalled witnessing Errol "chastise Elon a lot. Maybe belittle him." (Errol Musk has denied allegations that he was abusive to Maye or to his children.) Musk has also said that he was violently bullied at school. Though he is now six feet one, with a broad-shouldered build, he was "much, much smaller back in school," Taoushiani told me. "He wasn't very social."



"Ram them." That's your suggestion for everything."

Cartoon by John Klossner

Musk has said that he has Asperger's syndrome, a form of what is now known as autism-spectrum disorder, which is characterized by difficulty with social interactions. As a child, he would sometimes fall into trancelike states of deep thought, during which he was so unresponsive that his mother eventually took him to a doctor to check his hearing. Musk's quiet side persists—in my own interactions with him, I have found him to be thoughtful and measured. (Musk declined to answer questions for this story.) He can also be, as he joked during a stilted "Saturday Night Live" monologue, "pretty good at running human, in emulation mode."

Musk escaped into science fiction and video games. "One of the reasons I got into technology, maybe *the* reason, was video games," he said at a gaming-industry convention several years ago. In his early teens, Musk coded an eight-bit shooter game in the style of *Space Invaders* called *Blastar*, whose title screen, in a novelistic flourish, credits him as "E. R. Musk." The premise was basic: "mission: destroy alien freighter carrying deadly hydrogen bombs and status beam machines." But it won recognition from a South African trade magazine, which published the game's hundred and sixty-seven lines of code and paid Musk a small sum.

Musk often talks about his science-fiction influences. Some have manifested in straightforward ways: he has connected his love of Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" novels, whose characters grapple with a mathematically precise prediction of their civilization's collapse, to his obsession with insuring human survival beyond Earth. But some of Musk's touchstones present ironies. He has said that his hero is Douglas Adams, the writer who skewered both the hyper-rich and the progress-at-any-cost ethos that Musk has come to embody. In the "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy" novels and radio plays, the latter of which were broadcast in South Africa during Musk's childhood, a narcissistic playboy becomes the president of the galaxy, and Earth is demolished to make way for a space transit route. Musk is also an avowed fan of *Deus Ex*, a role-playing first-person-shooter video game that he has brought up when discussing his company Neuralink, which aspires to invent ability-enhancing body modifications like those featured in the game. During the pandemic, Musk seemed to embrace *COVID* denialism, and for a while he changed his Twitter profile picture to an image of the protagonist of the game, which turns on a manufactured plague designed to control the masses. But *Deus Ex*, like "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," is a fundamentally anti-capitalist text, in which the plague is the culmination of unrestrained corporate power, and the villain is the world's richest man, a media-darling tech entrepreneur with global aspirations and political leaders under his control.

In 1999, Musk stood outside his Bay Area home to accept the delivery of a million-dollar McLaren F1 sports car. He was in his late twenties, and wearing an oversized brown blazer. "Some could interpret purchasing this car as behavior characteristic of an imperialist brat," he told a CNN news crew. Then he beamed, saying that there were only about sixty such cars in the world. "My values may have changed," he added, "but I'm not consciously aware of my values having changed." Musk's fiancée, a Canadian writer named Justine Wilson, seemed more aware. "It's a million-dollar car. It's decadent," she said. "My fear is that we become spoiled brats. That we lose a sense of appreciation and perspective." The McLaren, she observed, was "the perfect car for Silicon Valley."

Musk had moved to Canada when he was in his late teens, and met Wilson when they both attended Queen's University, in Ontario. He later transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, graduating with degrees in economics and physics. In 1995, the early days of the World Wide Web, he and Kimbal founded a company that came to be called Zip2, an online city directory that they sold to newspapers. Musk has often described the company's humble origins, saying that he and his brother lived and worked in a small studio apartment, showering at a nearby Y.M.C.A. and eating at Jack in the Box. (Error at one point gave his sons twenty-eight thousand dollars. Musk, who has a tendency to fuss over questions of credit, has stated that his father's contribution came "much later," in a round of funding that "would've happened anyway.") At Zip2, Musk developed what he describes as his "hard-core" work style; even after he had his own apartment, he often slept on a beanbag at the office. But, in the end, the company's investors stripped him of his leadership role and installed a more experienced chief executive. Musk believed that the startup should have been targeting not just newspapers but consumers. Investors pursued a more modest vision instead. In 1999, Zip2 was sold to Compaq for three hundred and seven million dollars, earning Musk more than twenty million dollars.

Justine and Musk married the following year. After their first child died at ten weeks, from sudden infant death syndrome, the couple dealt with the tragedy in very different ways. Justine, by her account, grieved openly; Musk later told one of his biographers, Ashlee Vance, that "wallowing in sadness does no good for anyone around you." After pursuing I.V.F. treatment, the couple had twins, then triplets. (Musk now has at least nine children with three different women, and has said that he is doing his part to address one of his pet issues, the risk of population collapse; demographers are skeptical about the matter.) Justine wrote in an essay for *Marie Claire* that their relationship eventually buckled under the weight of Musk's obsession with work and his controlling tendencies, which began with him insisting, as they danced at their wedding, "I am the alpha in this relationship." A messy divorce ensued, leading to a legal dispute over their postnuptial financial agreement, which was settled years later. "He had grown up in the male-dominated culture of South Africa," Justine wrote. "The will to compete and dominate that made him so successful in business did not magically shut off when he came home." (Musk wrote a response to Justine's account in *Business Insider*, discussing the financial dispute, but he did not address Justine's characterizations of his behavior.)

After Musk left Zip2, he poured some twelve million dollars, a majority of his wealth, into another startup, an online bank called X.com. It was the first instance of his obsession with the letter "X," which has now appeared in the names of his companies, his products, and his son with the artist Grimes: X Æ A-12. The bank also marked the beginning of a long and so far unfulfilled quest—recently revived in his effort to reinvent Twitter—to create an "everything app," incorporating a payment system. In 2000, X.com merged with a competing online-payments startup, Confinity, co-founded by the entrepreneur Peter Thiel. In events that have since become Silicon Valley lore, Musk and Thiel battled for control of the company. Various accounts apportion blame differently. Hoffman told me, citing the story as an example of Musk's disingenuousness, that Musk had pushed for the merger by highlighting the leadership of his company's seasoned executive, only to force out the executive and place himself in the top role. "A merger like this, you're doing a marriage," Hoffman said. "And it's, like, 'I was lying to you intensely while we were dating. Now that we're married, let me tell you about the herpes.'" "People who have worked with Musk often describe him as controlling. One said, 'In the areas he wants to compete in, he has a very hard time sharing the spotlight, or not being the center of attention.'" In the fall of 2000, another coup, executed while Musk was on a long-delayed honeymoon with Justine, overthrew Musk and installed Thiel as the company's head. Two years later, eBay acquired the company, by then called PayPal, for \$1.5 billion, making Musk, who remained the largest shareholder, fabulously wealthy.

Perhaps the most revealing moment in the PayPal saga happened at its outset. In March, 2000, as the merger was under way, Musk was driving his new McLaren, with Thiel in the passenger seat. The two were on Sand Hill Road, an artery that cuts through Silicon Valley. Thiel asked Musk, "So what can this do?" Musk replied, "Watch this," then floored the gas pedal, hit an embankment, and sent the car airborne and spinning before it slammed back onto the pavement, blowing out its suspension and its windows. "This isn't insured," Musk told Thiel. Musk's critics have used the story to illustrate his reckless showboating, but it also underscores how often Musk has been rewarded for that behavior: he repaired the McLaren, drove it for several more years, then reportedly sold it at a profit. Musk delights in telling the story, lingering on the risk to his life. In one interview, asked whether there were parallels with his approach to building companies, Musk said, "I hope not." Appearing to consider the idea, he added, "Watch this. Yeah, that could be awkward with a rocket launch."

Of all Musk's enterprises, SpaceX may be the one that most fundamentally reflects his appetite for risk. Staff at SpaceX's Starship facility, in Boca Chica, Texas, spent December of 2020 preparing for the launch of a rocket known as SN8, then the newest prototype in the company's Starship program, which it hopes will eventually transport humans to orbit, to the moon, and, in the mission Musk speaks about with the most passion, to Mars. The F.A.A. had approved an initial launch date for the rocket. But an engine issue forced SpaceX to delay by a day. By then, the weather had shifted. On the new day, the F.A.A. told SpaceX that, according to its model of the wind's speed and direction, if the rocket exploded it could create a blast wave that risked damaging the windows of nearby houses. A series of tense meetings followed, with SpaceX presenting its own modelling to establish that the launch was safe, and the F.A.A. refusing to grant permission. Wayne Monteith, then the head of the agency's space division, was leaving an event at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station when he received a frustrated call from Musk. "Look, you cannot launch," Monteith told him. "You're not cleared to launch." Musk acknowledged the order.

Musk was on site in Boca Chica when SpaceX launched anyway. The rocket achieved liftoff and successfully performed several maneuvers intended to rehearse those of an eventual manned Starship. But, on landing, the SN8 came in too fast, and exploded on impact. (No windows were damaged.) The next day, Musk visited the crash site. In a picture taken that day, Musk stands next to the twisted steel of the rocket, dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, looking determined, his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed. His tweets about the explosion were celebratory, not apologetic. "He has a long history of launching and blowing up rockets. And then he puts out videos of all the rockets that he's blown up. And like half of America thinks it's really cool," the former *nasa* administrator Jim Bridenstine told me. "He has a different set of rules."

Hans Koenigsmann, then SpaceX's vice-president for flight reliability, started working on a customary report to the F.A.A. about the launch. Koenigsmann told me that he felt pressure to minimize focus on the launch process and Musk's role in it. "I sensed that he wanted it taken out," Koenigsmann said. "I disagreed, and in the end we wound up with a very different version from what was originally intended." Eventually, Koenigsmann was told not to write a report at all, and a letter was sent to the F.A.A. instead. The agency, meanwhile, opened its own investigation. Monteith told me that he agreed with Musk that the F.A.A. had been conservative about a situation that presented little statistical risk of casualties, but he was nevertheless troubled. "We had safety folks who were very upset about it," Monteith recalled. In a series of letters to SpaceX, Monteith accused the company of relying on data "hastily developed to meet a launch window," launching "based on 'impressions' and 'assumptions,'" and exhibiting "a concerning lack of operational control and process discipline that is inconsistent with a strong safety culture." In its responses, SpaceX proposed various safety reforms, but also pushed back, complaining that the F.A.A.'s weather model was unreliable and suggesting that the agency had been resistant to discussions about improving it. (SpaceX did not respond to requests for comment.)

The following March, Steve Dickson, then the F.A.A.'s administrator, called Musk. The two men spoke for thirty minutes. Like Kahl, Dickson was deferential, thanking Musk for his role in transforming the commercial space sector and acknowledging that SpaceX was taking steps to make its launches less risky. But Dickson, an F.A.A. spokesperson said in a statement, "made it clear that the FAA expects SpaceX to develop and foster a robust safety culture that stresses adherence to FAA rules." Dickson had navigated such conversations before, including with Boeing after two 737 *max* aircraft crashed. But this situation presented a thornier challenge. "It's not every day that the F.A.A. administrator releases a statement about a phone call that they have with the C.E.O. or the head of an aerospace company," an official at the agency told me. "That kind of gets into the soft pressure, public pressure that you don't do unless you are trying to change the incentive structure."

The F.A.A. issued no fine, though it grounded SpaceX for two months. "I didn't see that a fine would make any difference," Monteith told me. "He could pull that out of his pocket. However, not allowing launches, that would get the attention of a company that prides itself on being able to iterate and go fast." Musk has continued to complain about the agency. After it postponed another launch, he tweeted, "The FAA space division has a fundamentally broken regulatory structure." He added, "Under those rules, humanity will never get to Mars."



Cartoon by Maggie Larson

INTROVERT PROTECTION FORMATION

Musk has been fixated on space since his childhood. The idea for SpaceX came about after his exile from PayPal. "I went to the *nasa* website so I could see the schedule of when we're supposed to go" to Mars, Musk told *Wired*, in 2012. "At first I thought, jeez, maybe I'm just looking in the wrong place! Why was there no plan, no schedule? There was nothing." In 2001, he connected with space-exploration enthusiasts, and even travelled to Russia in an unsuccessful bid to buy missiles to use as rockets. The next year, he moved to Los Angeles, closer to California's aerospace industry, and ultimately he pulled together a team of engineers and entrepreneurs and founded SpaceX, to make his own rockets. Private rocket launches date back to the eighties, but no one had attempted anything on the scale that Musk envisioned, and it proved to be more difficult and expensive than he had anticipated. Musk has said that, by 2008, the company was nearly bankrupt, and that, after putting much of his wealth into SpaceX and Tesla, he wasn't far behind. "That was definitely the worst year of my life," he said in an interview on "60 Minutes." SpaceX's first three launches had failed, and there was no budget for another. "I had no more money left," Musk told Bridenstine, the *nasa* administrator, years later. "We managed to put together enough spare parts to do a fourth launch." Had that failed, he added, "SpaceX would have died." The launch was successful, and *nasa* soon awarded SpaceX a \$1.6-billion contract to resupply the International Space Station. In 2020, the company flew its first manned mission there—ending nearly a decade of American reliance on Russian craft for the task. SpaceX now launches more satellites than any other private company, with four thousand five hundred and nineteen in orbit as of July, occupying many of Earth's orbital routes. "Once the carrying capacity of an orbit is maxed out, you've basically blocked everyone from trying to compete in that market," Bridenstine told me.

There are competitors in the field, including Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin and Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, but none yet rival SpaceX. The new space race has the potential to shape the global balance of power. Satellites enable the navigation of drones and missiles and generate imagery used for intelligence, and they are mostly under the control of private companies. "The U.S. government is in massive catch-up to build a more resilient space architecture," Kahl, the former Pentagon Under-Secretary, told me. "And that only works if you can leverage the explosion of commercial space." Several officials told me that they were alarmed by *nasa*'s reliance on SpaceX for essential services. "There is only one thing worse than a government monopoly. And that is a private monopoly that the government is dependent on," Bridenstine said. "I do worry that we have put all of our eggs into one basket, and it's the SpaceX basket."

Even Musk's critics concede that his tendency to push against constraints has helped catalyze SpaceX's success. A number of officials suggested to me that, despite the tensions related to the company, it has made government bureaucracies nimbler. "When SpaceX and *nasa* work together, we work closer to optimal speed," Kenneth Bowersox, *nasa*'s associate administrator for space operations, told me. Still, some figures in the aerospace world, even ones who think that Musk's rockets are basically safe, fear that concentrating so much power in private companies, with so few restraints, invites tragedy. "At some point, with new competitors emerging, progress will be thwarted when there's an accident, and people won't be confident in the capabilities commercial companies have," Bridenstine said. "I mean, we just saw this submersible going down to visit the Titanic implode. I think we have to think about the non-regulatory environment as sometimes hurting the industry more than the regulatory environment."

In early 2022, Steven Cliff, then the deputy administrator of the Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, learned that potentially tens of thousands of Tesla vehicles had a feature that he found concerning. For years, Tesla has been working to create a totally self-driving car, a long-standing ambition of Musk's. Now Cliff was told that a version of Tesla's Full Self-Driving software, an experimental feature that lets the cars navigate with little intervention from a driver, permitted cars to roll through stop signs, at up to about six miles an hour. This was clearly illegal. Cliff's enforcement team contacted Tesla, and, in several meetings, a surprising conversation about safety and artificial intelligence played out. Representatives for Tesla seemed confused. Their response, as Cliff recalled, was "That's what humans do all the time. Show us the data, why it's unsafe." N.H.T.S.A. officials told Tesla that, regardless of human compliance, "you should not be able to program a computer to break the law for you." They demanded that Tesla update all the affected cars, removing the feature—a recall, in industry terms, albeit a digital one. "There was a lot of back-and-forth," Cliff told me. "Like, at midnight on the very last day, they blinked and ended up recalling the rolling-stop feature." (Tesla did not respond to requests for comment.)

Musk joined Tesla as an investor in 2004, a year after it was incorporated. (He has spent years defending the formative nature of his role and was eventually, in a legal settlement, one of several people granted permission to use the term "co-founder.") Musk was again entering a market bound by entrenched private interests and stringent regulation, which opened him up to more clashes with regulators. Some of the skirmishes were trivial. Tesla for a time included in its vehicles the ability to replace the humming noises that electric cars must emit—since their engines make little sound—with goat bleats, farting, or a sound of the owner's choice. "We're, like, 'No, that's not compliant with the regulations, don't be stupid,'" Cliff told me. Tesla argued with regulators for more than a year, according to an N.H.T.S.A. safety report. Nine days after the rolling-stop recall, the company pulled the noises, too. On Twitter, Musk wrote, "The fun police made us do it (sigh)."

"It's a little like Mom and Dad and children. Like, How far can I push Mom and Dad until they push back?" Cliff said. "And that's not a recipe for a strong safety culture."

The fart debate had low stakes; the over-all safety of the cars is a far greater matter. Tesla has repeatedly said that Autopilot, a more limited technology than Full Self-Driving, is safer than a human driver. Last year, Musk added that he would be "shocked" if Full Self-Driving didn't become safer than human drivers by the end of the year. But he has never made public the data needed to fully corroborate those claims. In recent months, new crash numbers from the N.H.T.S.A., which were first reported by the *Washington Post*, have shown an uptick in accidents—and fatalities—involving Autopilot and Full Self-Driving. Tesla has been secretive about the specifics. A person at the N.H.T.S.A. told me that the company instructed the agency to redact specifics about whether driver-assistance software was in use during crashes. (By law, regulators must abide by such requests for confidentiality, unless they decide to contest them in court.) Pete Buttigieg, the Secretary of Transportation, recently said that there were "concerns" about the marketing of Autopilot. Cliff told me he had seen data that showed Teslas were involved in "a disproportionate number of crashes involving emergency vehicles," though he said that the agency had not yet determined whether the technology or the human drivers was the cause. In a statement, a spokesperson for the agency said, "Multiple investigations remain open."

Officials who have worked at *osha* and at an equivalent California agency told me that Musk's influence, and his attitude about regulation, had made their jobs difficult. The Biden Administration, which is urgently trying to reduce reliance on fossil fuels, has concluded that it needs to work with Musk, because of his dominant position in the electric-car market. And Musk's personal wealth dwarfs the entire budget of *osha*, which is tasked with monitoring the conditions in his workplaces. "You add on the fact that he considers himself to be a master of the universe and these rules just don't apply to people like him," Jordan Barab, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor at *osha*, told me. "There's a lot of underreporting in industry in general. And Elon Musk kind of seems to raise that to an art form." Garrett Brown, a former field-compliance inspector at California's Division of Occupational Safety and Health, added, "We have a bad health-and-safety situation throughout the country. And it's worse in companies run by people like Elon Musk, who was ideologically opposed to the idea of government enforcement of public-health regulations."

In March, 2020, as pandemic lockdowns began, Musk e-mailed Tesla employees, telling them that he intended to violate orders and show up at work, and downplaying the significance of *covid-19*. Soon after, he lost an initial fight to keep a factory in Alameda County—Tesla's most productive in the U.S.—open. That April, after county officials extended shelter-in-place orders, Musk was on a conference call with outside financial analysts. His rhetoric became nakedly political, to an extent that would have been uncharacteristic just a few years earlier. "I would call it forcibly imprisoning people in their homes against all of their constitutional rights," he told the analysts, speaking of the lockdowns. "What the fuck?" he added. "It's an outrage. An outrage. . . . This is fascist. This is not democratic. This is not freedom. Give people back their goddam freedom." The pandemic seems to have sparked a pronounced shift in Musk. The lockdowns represented an example of what Hoffman told me Musk considered to be a cardinal sin: "getting in the way of the mission."

The following month, Musk sent a series of vitriolic tweets, threatening to file suit against Alameda County, to move Tesla's headquarters, and to flout the rules and reopen his factory, all of which he eventually did. The county essentially rubber-stamped the reopening soon afterward—a far cry from what Musk had invited. "I will be on the line with everyone else," he had tweeted, at the height of his frustration. "If anyone is arrested, I ask that it only be me."

Musk has, for much of his public life, presented himself as a centrist. "I'm socially very liberal," he told the technology reporter Kara Swisher in 2020. "And then economically right of center, maybe, or center." He has said that he donated to Hillary Clinton, and voted for both her and Joe Biden. But, in recent years, the more radical perspective that characterized his diatribes about *covid* has come to the fore. In March, 2022, Twitter restricted the account of the satirical Web site the Babylon Bee, after the site misgendered a government official. The next day, in texts later disclosed during the Twitter-acquisition process, Musk's contact "TJ" (identified by Bloomberg as his ex-wife Talulah Riley) expressed frustration with the development and urged him to purchase Twitter to "fight woke-ism." The following week, Musk polled his followers about whether Twitter respected free speech and, in a phone call to the Babylon Bee's C.E.O., joked about buying the platform. Finally, in April, 2022, he offered forty-four billion dollars for the company. Almost immediately, he tried to back out of the deal, prompting Twitter to sue. After months of legal proceedings, Musk resumed the acquisition process, and in October he assumed control of the company.

"Given unprovoked attacks by leading Democrats against me & a very cold shoulder to Tesla & SpaceX, I intend to vote Republican in November," he tweeted last year. By the time he bought Twitter, he was urging his followers to vote along similar lines, and appearing to back Ron DeSantis, whose candidacy he helped launch in a technically disastrous Twitter live event. Although Musk's teen-age daughter, Vivian, has come out as trans, he has embraced anti-trans sentiment, saying that he would lobby to criminalize "irreversible" gender-affirming care for children. (Vivian recently changed her last name, saying in a legal filing, "I no longer live with or wish to be related to my biological father in any way, shape or form.") Musk started spreading misinformation on the platform: he shared theories that the physical attack on Paul Pelosi, the husband of the former Speaker of the House, had followed a meeting with a male prostitute, and retweeted suggestions that reports accurately identifying a mass shooter as a white supremacist were a "psypop." Some people who know Musk well still struggle to make sense of his political shift. "There was nothing political about him ever," a close associate told me. "I've been around him for a long time, and had lots of deep conversations with the man, at all hours of the day—never heard a fucking word about this."

When Musk arrived at Twitter, he immediately gutted the company's staff, reducing the number of employees by about fifty per cent. One person who kept his job was Yoel Roth, the company's head of trust and safety. Roth, who is in his mid-thirties, is gay, Jewish, and liberal. His department was responsible for determining Twitter's rules; during the Trump Administration, he became embroiled in the culture wars. After the company began rolling out a new fact-checking policy that labelled two of Trump's tweets as misinformation, Kellyanne Conway, President Trump's aide, went on "Fox & Friends" and read out Roth's full name and spelled his username, adding, "He's about to get more followers." Trump then held up a *New York Post* cover mocking Roth, and Twitter users began recirculating tweets that Roth had written criticizing conservative candidates.

But when Musk took over he resisted calls to fire Roth. "We've all made some questionable tweets, me more than most, but I want to be clear that I support Yoel," he tweeted in October, 2022. "My sense is that he has high integrity, and we are all entitled to our political beliefs." That evening, Roth messaged Musk on Signal, thanking him. Musk responded, "You have my full support," and, the next day, he followed up with a screenshot of a tweet from Roth that described Mitch McConnell as "a bag of farts." Musk added, "Haha, I totally agree."

But the cuts that Musk had instituted quickly took a toll on the company. Employees had been informed of their termination via brusque, impersonal e-mails—Musk is now being sued for hundreds of millions of dollars by employees who say that they are owed additional severance pay—and the remaining staffers were abruptly ordered to return to work in person. Twitter's business model was also in question, since Musk had alienated advertisers and invited a flood of fake accounts by reinventing the platform's verification process. On November 10th, Roth sent a brief resignation e-mail. When his departure became public, Musk texted, asking to talk. "[I] would mean a lot if you would consider remaining at Twitter," he wrote. The two spoke that night, and Roth declined to return. Days later, he published an Op-Ed in the *Times*, questioning the future of user safety on the platform. (Twitter did not respond to requests for comment.)

# The Eternal Battle Over Who Is More Tired



Cartoon by David Ostow

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Soon afterward, Musk replied to a Twitter user surfacing a 2010 tweet from Roth, in which he'd shared a link to a Salon article about a teacher's being charged with having sex with an eighteen-year-old student and asked, "Can high school students ever meaningfully consent to sex with their teachers?"

"That explains a lot," Musk tweeted in reply. Minutes later, he posted an image showing a portion of Roth's doctoral dissertation, which focussed on the gay-hookup app Grindr and its user data. In the excerpt, Roth argued that such platforms will inevitably be used by people under eighteen, so they should do more to keep those individuals safe. "Looks like Yoel is in favor of children being able to access adult internet services," Musk wrote.

The attack fit a pattern: Musk's trolling has increasingly taken on the vernacular of hard-right social media, in which grooming, pedophilia, and human trafficking are associated with liberalism. In 2018, when a Thai youth soccer team was trapped in a cave, Musk travelled to Thailand to offer a custom-made miniature submarine to rescuers. The head of the rescue operation declined, and Musk lashed out on Twitter, questioning the expertise of the rescuers. After one of them, Vernon Unsworth, referred to the offer as a "P.R. stunt," Musk called him a "pedo guy." (Unsworth sued Musk for defamation, characterizing the harassment he received from Musk's followers as "a life sentence without parole." A judge ruled in favor of Musk, who argued that he hadn't been accusing Unsworth of actual pedophilia, just trying to insult him.)

Musk's tweet about Roth got nearly seventeen thousand quote tweets and retweets. "The moment that it went from being a moderation conversation to being a Pizzagate conversation, the risk level changed," Roth told me. "I spent my career looking at the absolute worst things that the Internet could do to people. Certainly, worse things have happened to people. But this is probably up there." Roth and his husband were forced to flee their house, a two-bedroom in El Cerrito, California, that they'd purchased just two years earlier. "And then as we are, like, packing our stuff and leaving and getting the dog loaded into the car and whatever, like, the *Daily Mail* publishes an article that gives people more or less a map to my house," Roth said. "At that point, we're, like, 'Oh, we're leaving this house potentially for the last time.'"

This summer, Twitter's cheerful blue bird logo came down from the roof of the company's headquarters, in San Francisco, and was replaced with a strobing "X." The new entity is a marriage between two parts of Musk. There's his career-long quest to create an everything app—integrating services ranging from communication to banking and shopping, and emulating products, like WeChat, that are popular in Asia. Sitting alongside that pragmatic goal is a newer, more confusing side of Musk, embodied by his desire to take back the town square from what he sees as woke discourse. Twitter has become a private company, so it's difficult to assess its finances, but numerous prominent advertisers have departed, and Meta recently launched Threads, a competitor that shamelessly emulates the old Twitter, and broke records for downloads. Musk threatened to sue, then challenged Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's founder and C.E.O., to a cage match, pledging to live-stream it and donate the proceeds to charity. (Zuckerberg has accepted. Musk has delayed committing to a date, citing a back injury.) The illuminated sign atop X's headquarters, after complaints to the Department of Building Inspection, came down as quickly as it had gone up.

Some of Musk's associates connected his erratic behavior to efforts to self-medicate. Musk, who says he now spends much of his time in a modest house in the wetlands of South Texas, near a SpaceX facility, confessed, in an interview last year, "I feel quite lonely." He has said that his career consists of "great highs, terrible lows and unrelenting stress." One close colleague told me, "His life just sucks. It's so stressful. He's just so dedicated to these companies. He goes to sleep and wakes up answering e-mails. Ninety-nine per cent of people will never know someone that obsessed, and with that high a tolerance for sacrifice in their personal life."

In 2018, the *Times* reported that members of the Tesla board had grown concerned about Musk's use of the prescription sleep aid Ambien, which can cause hallucinations. The *Wall Street Journal* reported earlier this year that he uses ketamine, which has gained popularity both as a depression treatment and as a party drug, and several people familiar with his habits have confirmed this. Musk, who smoked pot on Joe Rogan's podcast, prompting a nasa safety review of SpaceX, has, perhaps understandably, declined to comment on the reporting that he uses ketamine, but he has not disputed it. "Zombifying people with SSRIs for sure happens way too much," he tweeted, referring to selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, another category of depression treatment. "From what I've seen with friends, ketamine taken occasionally is a better option." Associates suggested that Musk's use has escalated in recent years, and that the drug, alongside his isolation and his increasingly embattled relationship with the press, might contribute to his tendency to make chaotic and impulsive statements and decisions. Amit Anand, a leading ketamine researcher, told me that it can contribute to unpredictable behavior. "A little bit of ketamine has an effect similar to alcohol. It can cause disinhibition, where you do and say things you otherwise would not," he said. "At higher doses, it has another effect, which is dissociation: you feel detached from your body and surroundings." He added, "You can feel grandiose and like you have special powers or special talents. People do impulsive things, they could do inadvisable things at work. The impact depends on the kind of work. For a librarian, there's less risk. If you're a pilot, it can cause big problems."

On July 12th, Musk announced xAI, his entry into a field that promises to alter much about life as we know it. He tweeted an image of the new company's Web site, featuring a characteristically theatrical mission statement: the firm's goal, he said, was "to understand the true nature of the universe." In the image, Musk highlighted the date and explained its significance. "7 + 12 + 23 = 42," the text read. "42 is the answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything." It was a reference to "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." In the series, an immensely complex artificial intelligence is asked to answer that question and, after computing for millions of years, answers with Adams's most famous punch line: 42. "I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is," the computer says. Earth itself, and all the organisms on it, are ultimately revealed to be a still larger computer, built to clarify the question. Adams does not portray this satirical vision as positive. Musk's announcement suggested more optimism: "Once you know the right question to ask, the answer is often the easy part."

Musk has been involved in artificial intelligence for years. In 2015, he was one of a handful of tech leaders, including Hoffman and Thiel, who funded OpenAI, then a nonprofit initiative. (It now has a for-profit subsidiary.) OpenAI had a less grandiose and more cautious mission statement than xAI's: to "advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity." In the first few years of OpenAI, Musk grew untappy with the company. He said that his efforts at Tesla to incorporate A.I. created a conflict of interest, and several people involved told me that this was true. However, they also said that Musk was frustrated by his lack of control and, as *Semafor* reported earlier this year, that he had attempted to take over OpenAI. Musk still defends his centrality to the company's origins, stressing his financial contributions in its fledgling days. (The exact figures are unclear: Musk has given estimates that range from fifty million to a hundred million dollars.) Throughout his involvement, Musk seemed preoccupied with control, credit, and rivalries. He made incendiary remarks about Demis Hassabis, the head of Google's DeepMind A.I. initiative, and, later, about Microsoft's competing effort. He thought that OpenAI wasn't sufficiently competitive, at one point telling colleagues that it had a "0%" chance of "being relevant." Musk left the company in 2018, renegeing on a commitment to further fund OpenAI, one of the individuals involved told me. "Basically, he goes, 'You're all a bunch of jackasses,' and he leaves," Hoffman said. The withdrawal was devastating. "It was very tough," Altman, the head of OpenAI, said. "I had to reorient a lot of my life and time to make sure we had enough funding." OpenAI went on to become a leader in the field, introducing ChatGPT last year. Musk has made a habit of trashing the company, wondering repeatedly, in public interviews, why he hasn't received a return on his investment, given the company's for-profit arm. "If this is legal, why doesn't everyone do it?" he tweeted recently.

It is difficult to say whether Musk's interest in A.I. is driven by scientific wonder and altruism or by a desire to dominate a new and potentially powerful industry. Several entrepreneurs who have co-founded businesses with Musk suggested that the arrival of Google and Microsoft in the field had made it a new brass ring, as space and electric vehicles had been earlier. Musk has maintained that he is motivated by his fear of the technology's destructive potential. In a podcast earlier this year, Ari Emanuel, the head of the Hollywood agency W.M.E., recalled Musk joking about an A.I.-dominated future. "Ari, do you have dogs?" Musk asked him. "Well, here's what A.I. is to you. You're the dog." In March, Musk, along with dozens of tech leaders, signed an open letter calling for a six-month pause in the development of advanced A.I. technology. "Contemporary AI systems are now becoming human-competitive at general tasks, and we must ask ourselves: Should we let machines flood our information channels with propaganda and untruth?" the letter said. "Should we automate away all the jobs, including the fulfilling ones? Should we develop nonhuman minds that might eventually outnumber, outsmart, obsolete and replace us?"

Yet in the period during which Musk endorsed a pause, he was working to build xAI, recruiting from major competitors, including OpenAI, and even, according to someone with knowledge of the conversation, contacting leadership at Nvidia, the dominant maker of chips used in A.I. The month the letter was distributed, Musk completed the registrations for xAI. He has said little about how the company will differ from preexisting A.I. initiatives, but generally has framed it in terms of competition. "I will create a third option, although starting very late in the game of course," he told the *Washington Post*. "That third option hopefully does more good than harm." Through A.I. research and development already under way at Tesla, and the trove of data he now commands through Twitter (which he recently barred OpenAI from scraping in order to train its chatbots), he may have some advantage, as he applies his sensibilities and his world view to that race. Hoffman told me, "His whole approach to A.I. is: A.I. can only be saved if I deliver, if I build it." As humanity creates A.I. in its own image, Hoffman argued, the principles and priorities of the leaders in the field will matter: "We want the construction of this to be not people with Messiah complexes."

At one point in "The Hitchhiker's Guide," Adams introduces the architects of the Earth supercomputer. They're powerful beings who have been living among us, disguised as mice. At first, they were motivated by simple curiosity. But seeking the question made them famous, and they began considering talk-show and lecture deals. In the end, Earth is demolished in the name of commerce, and their path to existential clarity along with it. The mice greet this with a shrug, mouth vague platitudes, and go on the talk-show circuit anyway. Musk isn't peddling pabulum. His initiatives have real substance. But he also wants to be on the show—or, better yet, to be the show himself.

In the open letter, alongside questions about the apocalyptic potential of artificial intelligence was one that reflects on the sectors of government and industry that Musk has come to shape. "Should we risk loss of control of our civilization?" he and his fellow-entrepreneurs wrote. "Such decisions must not be delegated to unelected tech leaders." ♦