

Michelle Goldberg

Elon Musk's Legacy Is Disease, Starvation and Death

There is an Elon Musk [post](#) on X, his social media platform, that should define his legacy. “We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper,” he wrote on Feb. 3. He could have “gone to some great parties. Did that instead.”

Musk's absurd scheme to save the government a trillion dollars by slashing “waste, fraud and abuse” has been a failure. DOGE claims it's saved \$175 billion, but experts [believe](#) the real number is significantly lower. Meanwhile, according to the Partnership for Public Service, which studies the federal work force, DOGE's attacks on government personnel — its firings, re-hirings, use of paid administrative leave and all the associated lack of productivity — could [cost](#) the government upward of \$135 billion this fiscal year, even before the price of defending DOGE's actions in court. Musk's rampage through the bureaucracy may not have created any savings at all, and if it did, they were negligible.

Now, Musk's Washington adventure is coming to an end, with the disillusioned billionaire announcing that he's leaving government behind. “It sure is an uphill battle trying to improve things in D.C., to say the least,” he [told](#) The Washington Post.

There is one place, however, where Musk, with the help of his minions, achieved his goals. He did indeed shred U.S.A.I.D. Though a rump operation is now operating inside the State Department, the administration says that it has terminated more than 80 percent of U.S.A.I.D. grants. Brooke Nichols, an associate professor of global health at Boston University, [has estimated that these cuts have already resulted in about 300,000 deaths](#), most of them of children, and will most likely lead to significantly more by the end of the year. That is what Musk's foray into politics accomplished.

White House officials deny that their decimation of U.S.A.I.D. has had fatal consequences. At a hearing in the House last week, Democrats confronted Secretary of State Marco Rubio with my colleague Nick Kristof's [reporting](#) from East Africa, documenting suffering and death caused by the withdrawal of aid. Rubio insisted no such deaths have happened, but people who've been in the field say he's either lying or misinformed.

Atul Gawande, an assistant administrator for global health at U.S.A.I.D. in Joe Biden's administration, told me that during a trip to Kenya last week, he visited the national referral hospital. There's been a major increase in the number of patients with advanced H.I.V. symptoms, a result of losing access to antiretroviral medication. At refugee camps on the border of South Sudan, food aid has been cut so severely that people are getting less than 30 percent of the calories they need. “It is not enough to survive on, and that has caused skyrocketing levels of severe malnutrition and deaths associated with it,” said Gawande.

Musk apparently did not anticipate that it would be bad PR for the world's richest man to take food and medicine from the world's poorest children. The Post [reported](#) that he hadn't foreseen “the intensity of

the blowback to his role in politics over the past year.” He’s been doing a series of interviews that Axios [called](#) an “image rehab tour.”

If there were justice in the world, Musk would never be able to repair his reputation, at least not without devoting the bulk of his fortune to easing the misery he’s engendered. Musk’s sojourn in government has revealed severe flaws in his character — a blithe, dehumanizing cruelty, and a deadly incuriosity. This should shape how he’s seen for the rest of his public life.

Musk sometimes refers to people he holds in contempt as “NPCs,” videogame speak for characters who aren’t controlled by players and thus have no agency. More than just an insult, the term, I think, reveals something about his worldview. He either doesn’t view most other people as entirely real or doesn’t see the point of treating them as such. As he told Joe Rogan this year, “The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy,” referring to the emotion as a “bug” in our system.

Yet even as he prides himself on dispassionate rigor, Musk has proved remarkably uninterested in figuring out how the government that he sought to transform really works. Samantha Power, head of U.S.A.I.D. under Biden, told me she tried to speak with members of the new administration, hoping to convince them there were elements of U.S.A.I.D.’s work that they could leverage for their own agenda. But aside from one meeting with transition officials, her outreach was ignored.

Instead, Musk seemed to derive his view of the agency from conspiracy theorists on X. There, he called U.S.A.I.D. a “radical-left political psy op” and amplified a [post](#) from the right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos smearing it as “the most gigantic global terror organization in history.”

It would have been easy for Musk to take his private plane to a country like Uganda to see for himself the work U.S.A.I.D. has done providing medicine to people with H.I.V. or feeding refugees from South Sudan. Instead, he drew on the counsel of internet trolls and staffed DOGE with lackeys who were similarly ignorant. “If you heard the conversations U.S.A.I.D. staff had with the DOGE people, there is no word in any language that captures the level of obliviousness about what U.S.A.I.D. actually did,” said Power.

This kind of intellectual carelessness should make people re-evaluate their faith in Musk’s brilliance. “Being president doesn’t change who you are; it reveals who you are,” Michelle Obama has said. The same is true, apparently, of being the president’s best friend, even fleetingly.