

Elon Musk's painful departure

The Tesla founder's much-heralded war on government waste has had uncertain results

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What began with a chainsaw is ending in a whimper. Elon Musk's looming exit from Washington brings the oddest chapter of Donald Trump's presidency to an early close. By his own metrics, Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency has failed. Far from achieving his touted \$2tn in savings, Doge may end up costing the taxpayer. Musk has meanwhile brought harm on Tesla, where he will soon return. Was there a hidden method to his madness? Two Musk gains can be spotted in the rubble. The first is the psychic value to him and Trump of harming their enemies. The cliché about an expensive divorce being worth every penny applies. Musk's net worth has fallen by about \$130bn since Trump's inauguration. Yet he has instilled fear into the bureaucracy from the CIA to the Department of Education. The downsides to Doge's valley of tears — a demoralised workforce and bad headlines about non-existent savings — can be presented as a win. Musk assaulted the deep state. With some help from the courts, the bureaucracy has fought back but is badly wounded. Musk's second upside could take a while to register. Trump's "Golden Dome", which aims to replicate Israel's "Iron Dome" for all of the US, could be one of the biggest taxpayer outlays since Ronald Reagan's strategic defence initiative, better known as "Star Wars". In dollar terms Trump's dome may even rival Nasa's Project Apollo, which cost \$280bn in today's money. Since the missile shield would need to rely on swarms of satellites, Musk's SpaceX would be the largest beneficiary. The company has formed a Golden Dome consortium with Palantir and Anduril, which are run by his Big Tech friends. Musk's lasting impact on Washington may thus be to divert a big chunk of US taxpayer money to his empire. As leaving gifts go, this one would be very nice. Whether it would enhance US national security is someone else's problem. Ditto on whether Golden Dome contracts qualify as waste, fraud or abuse. When only one company can fulfil the project's biggest functions, there is little prospect of an open bidding process. Yet Musk has damaged himself and shows no signs of stopping now. What has driven the boycotts of Tesla in Europe and partly in the US is not Doge but the insanitary company that Musk keeps on his X platform. The London spoof advertising campaign that called Tesla a "Swasticar" — "from zero to 1939 in three seconds" — came in reaction to his far-right boosterism, not to his war on bureaucracy. Unless he can temper his id, Tesla's brand will stay contaminated. Getting Pam Bondi, Trump's attorney-general, to label Tesla showroom vandalism as terrorism indicates Musk remains clueless about his image problem. Not for the first time, psychology may be a better behavioural predictor of the Trump administration than ideology. In his own way, Trump is trying to pour balm on Musk's wounded pride. Sitting in a corner of his cabinet meeting last week, Musk acknowledged the room's gratitude for his

sacrifice. In a soft-hitting exit interview for Fox with Lara Trump, the president's daughter-in-law, he seemed hurt by the public's misunderstanding of him. "Now you're here in Washington DC alongside President Trump to try and essentially save our country," she said. "Has anyone said thank you to you?" Many had indeed thanked Musk, he said. But others had uncharitably interpreted his Nazi-seeming salutes as Nazi salutes: "They really are trying every angle to get me." With hindsight, it is clear that Musk's standing with Trump fell in early April when his money failed to tip an election for a conservative Supreme Court candidate in Wisconsin. Though Musk spent \$22mn in the most expensive judicial race ever, the other judge won, which means there is still a liberal majority on that swing state's highest court. Wisconsin was a litmus test that Trump set and Musk failed. But his biggest test was whether Doge could unearth large-scale corruption. That both the judiciary and the Republican-controlled Congress are unenthusiastic about Musk's "wall of receipts" is a sign the US system may be holding up better than feared. Either way, Musk has reached a fork in the road. His AI platform, Grok, had this to say about his time in Washington: "His DOGE experiment resulted in operational turmoil, legal entanglements, and limited results, overshadowing modest gains . . . less a triumph than a cautionary tale." If there is such a thing as a chainsaw that boomerangs, Musk invented it.

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