Musk promised budget cuts. Musk delivered a panopticon of government spying on citizens.

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The Department of Government Efficiency, the secretive White House initiative founded by Elon Musk, was sold to the American public under the guise of cost-cutting. In this regard it has failed. After more than 110 days of austerity theater, DOGE has shaved just a few billion dollars from annual federal spending. Musk, who is poised to "significantly" reduce his involvement in the project, had promised $2 trillion.

DOGE has had much more success expanding the executive branch's domestic surveillance capacity.

Citing whistleblower complaints, Rep. Gerald Connolly divulged last month that DOGE is building a "master database," a single exhaustive repository containing personal data held by numerous federal agencies, including the IRS, the Social Security Administration, and the Department of Health and Human Services.

"The DOGE team is reportedly engaged in an unprecedented effort to build a massive database using data from SSA and across the federal government," the Democratic lawmaker wrote in a letter to the SSA Office of the Inspector General.

Efforts to build the database are part of a Trump executive order dictating the elimination of the federal government's "information silos." In signing the executive order in March, Trump tied it to DOGE's nominal mission of "stopping waste, fraud, and abuse."

But in action, amalgamating federal data is part of the White House's push to deport and intimidate undocumented immigrants, including by falsifying SSA death records to prevent undocumented immigrants from accessing housing and banking services. DOGE employees are also using data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to remove undocumented immigrants from housing, even if they are living with family members who are legal residents.

The DOGE master database is being built and housed at the Department of Homeland Security and includes the use of biometric data to track immigrants, according to Wired. "They are already cross-referencing immigration [data] with SSA and IRS as well as voter data," one DHS official told the outlet. FedScoop reported last week that members of DOGE have been spotted at a DHS border security office that houses fingerprint, facial, and iris records.

Palantir, a data firm that creates analysis software for government surveillance, has been helping DOGE build its master database. "If they are designing a deportation machine, they will be able to do that," a former IRS employee told CNN. Several DOGE employees previously worked for Palantir, which was founded by Trump and Musk ally Peter Thiel. The firm was recently awarded a $30 million contract from Immigration and Customs Enforcement to develop a new platform, the Immigration Lifecycle Operating System, to track undocumented immigrants and manage deportations.

Implications for U.S. citizens

The data collection operations undertaken by DOGE are not limited to undocumented immigrants. In its effort to build a consolidated database, DOGE has also sought to gather sensitive information on millions of American citizens, including from the Social Security Administration.

Steve Davis, a Musk deputy leading DOGE's operations at SSA, has informed staff that he intends to interweave the agency's records with "all data across government," according to the Washington Post. And filings submitted in a lawsuit against the Trump administration revealed that a number of DOGE employees already have access to the Social Security numbers, contact information, and medical histories of Medicaid and Medicare recipients.

Siloing government data has been standard practice for decades, as the alternative — a single repository — would introduce acute data security threats. "The access DOGE is requesting materially increases the risk of hacking and data exploitation," Erie Meyer, a former technologist at the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, warned in an affidavit for a lawsuit seeking to block DOGE's access to Social Security records.

The Trump administration could also use a master database to collect damaging information against perceived domestic enemies. "This is what we were always scared of," civil liberties lawyer Kevin Bankston told the New York Times, referring to DOGE's plan to build a master database. "The infrastructure for turnkey totalitarianism is there for an administration willing to break the law."

There is precedent for a similar effort in recent U.S. history. Throughout the Cold War, the FBI used financial and other personal records to help build its DETCOM Program, a list of Americans — mostly labor and civil rights leaders — who would be detained in the event of a "national emergency."

The Privacy Act of 1974, passed amid public resistance to a proposed federal databank, was meant to limit how the government can collect and share Americans' personal information. But critics of the law have said it is not easily enforceable and allows for too many loopholes. University of Washington law professor Dongsheng Zang argued in 2023 that the Privacy Act remains "unfinished," particularly in the age of AI. "What is needed today is a genuine bill of rights for personal data—in the constitutional sense, a decisive shift from the past," he wrote.

Why DOGE?

As for why the Trump administration would lean on the Musk project to accomplish its surveillance goals, consider the numerous civil servants who have chosen resignation or dismissal over taking part in DOGE's legally dubious data harvesting operations.

At the IRS, several top civil servants, including its acting commissioner, chief privacy officer, and chief financial officer, left the agency last month after the Trump administration devised a scheme to use tax records to help deport immigrants. Senior civil servants at the Treasury Department and the Department of the Interior have also been forced out after refusing to cooperate with DOGE.

As a mercenary force, the technologists and financiers who make up DOGE have shown to be loyal to Trump and willing to carry out his objectives with little regard for Washington proprieties. Some members of DOGE have reportedly even used artificial intelligence models to surveil federal workers for perceived anti-Trump or anti-Musk sentiment.