

Elon Musk Looks Desperate

How to lose \$148 billion in less than two months

By Charlie Warzel

For years, Donald Trump's critics have accused him of behaving like a crooked used-car salesman. Yesterday afternoon, he did it for real on the White House South Lawn.

Squinting in the sun with Elon Musk, Trump stood next to five Tesla vehicles, holding a piece of paper with handwritten notes about their features and costs. Trump said he would purchase a car himself at full price. Then Trump and Musk got into one of the cars.

Musk explained that the electric vehicle was "like a golf cart that goes really fast."

Trump offered his own praise to the camera:

"Wow. That's beautiful. This is a different panel than I've—everything's computer!"

This was a stilted, corrupt attempt to juice a friend's stock, and certainly beneath the office of the presidency. But you ought not to overlook just how embarrassing the spectacle was for Musk. The subtext of the event—during which Trump also declared that the White House would label any acts of violence against Tesla dealerships as domestic terrorism—was the ongoing countrywide protests against Tesla, due to Musk's role in the Trump administration. In some cities, protesters have defaced or damaged Tesla vehicles and set fire to the company's charging stations. Tesla's stock price has fallen sharply—almost 50 percent since its mid-December, postelection peak—on the back of terrible sales numbers in Europe. The hastily assembled White House press event was presented as a show of solidarity, but the

optics were quite clear: Musk needed Trump to come in and fix his mess for him.

And Tesla isn't the only Musk venture that's struggling. SpaceX's massive new Starship rocket has exploded twice this year during test flights. And Ontario, Canada, has canceled its contract with his Starlink internet company to provide service to remote communities, citing Trump's tariffs. According to the Bloomberg Billionaire Index, Musk is \$148 billion poorer than he was on Inauguration Day (he is currently worth \$333.1 billion).

Just 17 days after wielding a chain saw and dancing triumphantly onstage at CPAC, the billionaire looked like he was about to cry on the Fox Business channel earlier this week. He confessed that he was having "great difficulty" running his many businesses, and let out a long, dismal sigh and shrugged when asked if

he might go back to his businesses after he's done in the administration.

The world's richest man can be cringe, stilted, and manic in public appearances, but rarely have I seen him appear as defeated as he has of late, not two months into his role as a presidential adviser. In the past few weeks, he's been chastised by some of Trump's agency heads for overstepping his bounds as an adviser (Trump sided with the agency heads). Reports suggest that some Republican lawmakers are frustrated with Musk's bluster and that the DOGE approach to slashing the federal bureaucracy is angering constituents and making lawmakers less popular in their districts. DOGE has produced few concrete "wins" for the Trump administration and has instead alienated many Americans who see Musk as presiding over a cruel

operation that is haphazardly firing and rehiring people and taking away benefits. Numerous national polls in recent weeks indicate that a majority of respondents disapprove of Musk's role and actions in the government.

Musk's deep sighs on cable TV and emergency Tesla junkets on the White House lawn are hints that he may be beginning to understand the precariousness of his situation. He is well known for his high risk tolerance, overleveraging, and seemingly wild business bets. But his role at DOGE represents the biggest reputational and, consequently, financial gamble of his career. Musk is playing a dangerous game, and he looks to be losing control of the narrative.

And the narrative is everything. Elon Musk is many things—the richest man in the world, an

internet-addled conspiracy theorist, the controller of six companies, perhaps even the shadow president of the United States—but most importantly, he is an idea. The value of Musk may be tied more to his image than his actual performance. He’s a human meme stock.

A CNN clip from late October captures this notion. In it, a reporter is standing outside one of Musk’s America PAC rallies in Pennsylvania, interviewing the CEO’s superfans, most of whom are unequivocal that Musk is “the smartest man in the world.” He has an engineer’s mindset, one attendee claims, meaning he sees the world differently. Two other men in the clip say that Musk got them to pay attention to politics (and to Trump, specifically). These people had fallen hard for a cultivated image of Musk as a Thomas Edison

or Tony Stark type, a great man of history who is single-handedly pushing the bounds of progress. Musk has had great success popularizing electric vehicles and building new rockets (though many still debate his direct involvement in the engineering). These supporters might have been fans of his companies, but they seem to have also fallen for the myth of his genius, a story born out of years of hagiographic books, news articles reporting his hyperbolic claims, and Musk's own ability to command attention.

[Read: Elon Musk's texts shatter the myth of the tech genius](#)

The image of Musk as a true visionary has proved surprisingly durable. In the early to mid-2010s, Musk took advantage of a different era of technology coverage—one that was more gadget-focused and largely uncritical—to hype his ideas for the future of

transportation and interplanetary exploration. At that time, Tesla, his signature project, was coded as progressive and marketed as being in line with climate-change goals. The cultural dynamic of these ideas has changed, but the fundamental product being sold by Musk has not: one man with a singular ability to brute force his way to the future.

Musk's trajectory changed after Trump was first elected president. It was during this period that Musk—already an incessant poster—realized how Twitter could be used to command an unbelievable amount of attention. Even when that attention was negative, the process of repeatedly making himself the main character on the platform elevated Musk's profile. He became more polarizing (for chastising journalists, behaving erratically, making a

supposed weed joke on Twitter that got him in trouble with the SEC, and getting sued for defamation for calling somebody a “pedo guy”), yet this somehow only added to Musk’s lore.

For years, valid criticisms of the Tesla executive came with an asterisk: *He’s erratic, crude, even a little unstable, but that’s all part of the larger visionary package.* Kara Swisher showcased this dynamic well in a 2018 *New York Times* column titled “Elon Musk Is the Id of Tech.” “I find the hagiography around him tiresome and even toxic,” she wrote. But also, “Mr. Musk’s mind and ideas are big ones.” As Swisher noted, Musk’s attention-seeking at the time had a secondary effect of alienating him from some of his peers and fans. But tweet by tweet, Musk found a different audience, one eager to embrace his visionary image,

provided he took up their crusade against “wokeism.”

During the pandemic, Musk’s posting frequency intensified considerably as he began to stake out more reactionary territory. He called the COVID-19 panic in March 2020 “dumb” and later that year tweeted that “pronouns suck.” Musk endeared himself to the right wing by positioning himself as a free-speech warrior, a posture that ultimately led him to purchase Twitter. Right-wing influencers and the MAGA faithful saw Musk’s turn as proof of their movement’s ascendance, but what has happened since Musk turned Twitter into X is nothing short of audience capture: Musk has fully become the person his right-wing fanboys want him to be, pushing far beyond a mere dalliance with conspiracy theories and “Great Replacement” rhetoric. It

is hardly controversial to suggest based on Musk's posts and blatant political activism that the centibillionaire has been further radicalized by his platform, which he then turned into a political weapon to help elect Trump.

Musk's X and MAGA bets mostly paid off, at least in the near term. Before Musk bought Twitter, I highlighted a comment from Lily Francus, then the director of quant research at Moody's Analytics, who noted, "I do think fundamentally that a significant fraction of Tesla's value is due to the fact that Elon can command this attention continuously."

Francus doesn't go as far as to say that Tesla behaves like a meme stock—which can surge in price after going viral as a result of coordinated efforts online—but that Musk himself has this quality. Musk's Twitter

purchase was a bad deal financially and has been detrimental to X's bottom line, but his ownership of the platform helped boost his cultural and political relevance by keeping him in the center of the news cycle. Similarly, Musk going all in on Donald Trump, becoming a megadonor to Republicans, and ultimately getting the DOGE gig all resulted in Tesla stock soaring—up until a point.

You can argue that there's a flywheel effect to all of this. Musk's polarizing, upsetting, attention-seeking behavior has made him unavoidable and increased his political influence, which, in turn, has increased his net worth overall. This has only improved Musk's standing with Trump, who both respects great wealth and appears flattered by the notion that the richest man in the world wants to

spend his time shadowing him around Washington and Mar-a-Lago.

Musk is used to being leveraged, trading on his reputation or his illiquid assets to keep the flywheel spinning. To his credit, he tends to make it work. He's flouted the law when that has been advantageous to his business interests and taken advantage of a culture of elite impunity. He's long been unafraid to get sued or reprimanded by a government agency. But two important things are different in his current situation. The first is the stakes of his reputational bet—rather than alienating himself from progressives or the media, Musk is threatening to meddle with essential government services, such as Social Security, that millions of Americans rely on. Indeed, Musk floated the idea of cutting Social Security benefits in his Fox Business interview on

Monday. Whether he's in charge of cuts or not, as DOGE's figurehead, Musk risks infuriating countless people who object to the federal firings. Breaking the government is orders of magnitude different than buying a niche but influential microblogging platform.

[Read: There are no more red lines](#)

The second difference is the man he's tied his reputation to: Trump. Musk's attention-seeking and fondness for organizational chaos are usually unmatched, giving him an advantage in most of his dealings. This is not the case with Trump, whose shamelessness and penchant for discarding close confidants when they become liabilities are well documented. Musk is rich and powerful, but he is not the durable, singular political figure that Trump is. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario where this ends poorly for Musk. The flywheel could

reverse: Musk could become universally reviled, causing the protests to increase and his net worth to shrink. The richest man in the world is valuable to Trump, as is the myth of Musk as the modern Edison. But mere billionaires? They are fungible tokens and easily interchangeable dais members in Trump's eyes—just ask Mark Zuckerberg.

It would be foolish to suggest with any certainty that Musk is cooked. Historically, he's managed to wriggle out of trouble. Perhaps the most hopeful outcome for Musk is that Trump has too much of his own presidency tied to Musk to throw him under the bus. It's too early to say.

Yesterday's White House stunt had all the hallmarks of Trump corruption, but there was something else, too—an air of desperation. It was a tacit admission that the protests are

working and that Musk and Trump are rattled enough by current sentiment that they're willing to turn the South Lawn into a showroom. Watching Musk clam up on Fox Business or quietly idle next to Trump in front of the White House, it's even easier than normal to see past Musk's trademark bullshitting and bluster. These moments make clear that this time, Musk has wagered the only thing he can't easily buy back—the very myth he created for himself.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Charlie Warzel

Charlie Warzel is a staff writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of its newsletter Galaxy Brain, about technology, media, and big ideas. He can be reached via email.

