

Elon Musk's self-destruction

The cost for Donald Trump of keeping the world's richest man by his side is growing

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When Elon Musk said he loved Donald Trump “as much as a straight man can love another”, the emetic effect was widespread. Trump is one of the few people left in Washington DC who likes having Musk around. Yet having given Musk more power than any private figure in US history, the president is watching his benefactor turn into an albatross. The question is how Trump will get rid of Musk, not whether. The price of having him as co-helmsman is already steep. The New York Times chronicled how Trump clipped Musk's wings in a heated cabinet meeting last week. Cabinet heads, rather than Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency, would take care of their own hiring and firing, Trump said. His White House had until then been notably leak free — in contrast to his first term. But it appears senior staff are keen to see the back of the chainsaw-wielding oligarch. The showdown had been set up with the aim of hastening that day.

A measure of Musk's worry about his waning star is that his visit to Mar-a-Lago last weekend was not originally scheduled, say insiders. Moreover, Musk has tried to funnel millions more into Trump's political action committees and been turned down. Trump is not known to refuse money. But it would look like Musk was buying his prolonged stay. His standing is dropping as fast as Tesla's stock price. Trump's approval rating has remained steady. With signs of a coming “Trump recession”, Musk may still be a useful lightning rod.

But that is the extent of his upside. His sway is mostly negative. There is not a Republican legislator or Trump principal who is not terrified of Musk's power. A \$50mn cheque to fund a primary challenge could end a senator's career — \$10mn for a legislator. Musk's X, which is Maga's informal state broadcast arm, could also destroy a cabinet member's career. Officials now routinely issue press releases first on X. The secretary of state, Marco Rubio, first announced plans to pare back USAID on X.

There appears to be nothing Musk will not say to defame those in his way. This has been apparent since he accused a beleaguered caver of being a paedophile a few years ago. Musk is only acting more like himself. But his willingness to character assassinate is interfering with Rubio's job. Musk recently threatened to trigger a collapse in Ukraine's frontline by pulling his Starlink satellite service. After Poland's foreign minister, Radosław Sikorski, objected, Musk posted: “Be quiet, small man . . . There is no substitute for Starlink.” Poland is one of the few European countries Trump has said he would aid in the event of an attack. An impotent Rubio felt obliged to back up Musk.

But the cost of keeping him by Trump's side is growing. In ignorance of how the federal government works, Musk is only causing damage. This also undercuts Russell Vought, head of the White House Office of Management and Budget, who

has spent years drawing up plans to deconstruct the administrative state. He was co-author of Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation's radical blueprint for a second Trump term. The traumatising of America's civil service will outlast Musk. But Vought is likely to do it less incompetently. Nor does he share Musk's seeming reluctance to go after the Pentagon, which is a major source of Musk's federal contracts.

It is tempting to think Musk has a political death wish. The recent drop in the wannabe trillionaire's net worth has also almost wiped out his post-election gains. But that would be naive. Doge's access to taxpayer accounts, social security records and federal employee data would offer a gold mine for any AI titan. Musk's temptation to Hoover it up for his own ends will be great. But that means retaining Trump's trust. If Musk has any self-knowledge, he will wear suits from now on and keep his offspring out of the Oval Office. After he took his four-year-old son, X, to the White House last month, insiders say Trump asked for the HMS Resolute desk to be disinfected. The boy felt just as at home as his father.

There is also Musk's impact on Trump's China policy. As clients in the US, Europe and elsewhere spurn Tesla and search for alternatives to SpaceX, Musk's commercial reliance on China is growing. Musk's dovish influence on China policy is plain. Trump now sounds almost as uninterested in Taiwan's fate as he is in Ukraine's. Most of the rest of his team are China hawks. If and when Trump turns against China, that will be another sign of Musk's descent.

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