The Architect

Behind Elon Musk imperial presidency there's Russell Vought.

By Max Chafkin

Cat Farman realized in January that her job might be at serious risk. It was the night she learned that a small group of engineers close to Elon Musk had forced their way into the headquarters of the US Agency for International Development. In the days that followed, they would gain access to sensitive employee records and bar staff from the building. The legality of all this was questionable—USAID exists because of an act of Congress, meaning it can only be dissolved the same way—but that didn't deter Musk from declaring victory. "We spent the weekend feeding USAID into the wood chipper," he posted on X on Feb. 3.

Farman works for a different government agency, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, but she understood that the USAID news suggested she might be next. The CFPB, like USAID, is fairly obscure, with a do-gooder mission that conservatives, including Musk, have derided as wasteful and excessively woke. "I could see we were vulnerable in the same way USAID was," says Farman, who's president of the CFPB's union.

Union members set up a table in the lobby, scoured news reports for names of anyone connected to Musk's White House office, the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, and looked for any sign of them within the CFPB's employee directory. On Feb. 7, Farman's union issued a press release noting that it had discovered three "dodgy DOGE bros" working at the CFPB. They were Chris Young (formerly of Musk's political action committee), Nikhil Rajpal (formerly of X and a college libertarian group) and Gavin Kliger (who'd worked with Musk on the attempted closure of USAID). The DOGE bros had been given access to the CFPB's human resources, finance and procurement records, ostensibly to conduct an audit to identify services to cut. The same day, Musk seemed to confirm what Farman feared: The plan was to cut them all. "RIP CFPB," Musk posted on X, adding the tombstone emoji.



CFPB headquarters in Washington, DC. *Photographer: Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images*

Farman knew those words didn't necessarily mean her agency was dead. Musk's tenure in President Donald Trump's second administration has been defined by chaos as much as cost-cutting. Musk has claimed to have cut $150 billion from the federal budget, a substantial sum if true. But independent analyses have suggested the real number may be much lower than advertised. Critics have accused his team of exaggerating or simply misunderstanding its impact, and its most dramatic defenestrations, USAID included, were blocked (at least temporarily) by federal judges. Musk's own antics on social media, on podcasts and in public settings have at times come off as politically unproductive, ineffective, clownish or all of the above. The press release from Farman's union hinted at some of this. "CFPB Union members welcome our newest colleagues and look forward to the smell of Axe Body Spray in our elevators," the union wrote.

But the following day, it became clear to Farman that her adversary wasn't Musk, or any engineers who might have doused themselves with Axe's unique eau de middle school. She was really up against Russell Vought, the Trump loyalist who'd just been named director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as well as acting director of the CFPB. Farman hadn't heard of Vought before he became CFPB director, which is pretty much how Vought likes it. A self-described "boring budget guy," he's best known for co-authoring the 900-page policy playbook of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, which has become something of a bible for Trump's second term. Vought's think tank, the Center for Renewing America, has produced numerous policy papers that advocate for such Trump fixations as the annexation of Greenland ("a prudent aim," according to a CRA paper) and enacting broad tariffs ("just as sometimes a nation must go to war with guns and bombs, so sometimes

are trade wars necessary"), among others. At the center of Vought's ideology is the unitary executive theory, which critics say amounts to an argument that Trump should have wide latitude to do whatever he wants.



Vought arriving at a Senate confirmation hearing in 2020. *Photographer: Andrew Harrer/Bloomberg*

Vought's unique combination of loyalty and knowledge of how the government actually works makes him perhaps the most powerful person in Washington not named Donald Trump. If you see a Republican politician or a member of the Trump administration talking about the "deep state," or the "regime," there's an almost 100% chance they know his work. "Nobody in DC has a better grip on the numbers and the management process of the federal government than Russ Vought," says Steve Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist. "He's one of the critical architects of the Trump restructuring

of the US government." This includes Musk, who's been in regular contact with Vought from the start of the presidential transition and is seen by Vought's allies as the public-facing arm of his agenda.

The two men are unlikely allies. Bald and bearded, with a nasal voice and a professorial affect, Vought is as deliberate as Musk is erratic, as focused as Musk is scattered, as detail-oriented as Musk is deliberately obtuse. "There are members of the Trump administration who are woefully incompetent," says Bobby Kogan, who served as an adviser to the OMB under President Joe Biden and is now a senior director at the Center for American Progress. "Russ is very smart. He's careful. He absolutely knows what he's doing."

The example of the CFPB showed how this tag team has been working. While Musk took credit for the shutdown and his DOGE team attracted attention from union members, it was Vought who quietly did much of the actual work. On Feb. 8, his first full day as the CFPB's interim director, Vought sent an email ordering employees to stop whatever they were doing and informed the Federal Reserve that the CFPB wouldn't take any further funding for the year. In the days that followed, he closed the office, canceled most of the agency's contracts, axed more than 200 employees and began preparations for far wider layoffs. "He wasn't trying to make it more efficient," Farman says. "They were trying to illegally fire everybody." (The Trump administration has disputed this.)

Like many committed civil servants, Farman is an idealist who regards her agency's work—protecting consumers against financial scams big and small—as both apolitical and righteous. Vought seems to believe the opposite. "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected," he said in a speech last year. "When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work, because they are increasingly seen as the villains." This was Farman's introduction to her new boss. She watched a video recording of that speech, first published by ProPublica, the weekend Vought took charge. Having that sentiment out in the open, "I almost felt better," she says. "He wants to f--- with us. To get us to quit."

Instead, Farman's union sued, arguing that Vought's actions amounted to a stealth attempt to illegally dismantle the CFPB without congressional approval. A week later a federal judge granted a temporary restraining order that paused the cancellation of contracts and any mass firings. The circumstances, the judge said, were exigent, given that the agency had already "been largely dismantled." A current CFPB staffer, testifying in a court affidavit, described conversations with senior officials at the bureau who said Vought's plan is to turn the agency into a single room with "five men and a phone." (Administration lawyers have denied this was the goal and said the downsizing effort has been lawful.)

Contrasting Vought's vision with the founding aims of the CFPB, which Senator Elizabeth Warren dreamed up as a response to the 2008 financial crisis, hints at the scope of Musk and Vought's ambitions. But while Musk was the main character of the first two months of Trump's second term, his influence in Washington may not last, amid questionable results, poor approval numbers and the shrinking share price of Musk's publicly traded car company, Tesla Inc. Musk also engineered a high-profile embarrassment for Trump by injecting himself and funneling at least $20 million into the April 1 Wisconsin Supreme Court race on behalf of Trump's candidate—who lost in a rout, after the race became a referendum on Musk. Buzz around Washington is that Musk may soon be on his way

out. “He’s going to want to get back to his businesses full time,” Trump recently told reporters aboard Air Force One.

If he does, Vought would become even more important. A Trump administration official, who requested anonymity to share internal discussions, says Vought is widely perceived as preparing to pick up wherever Musk leaves off. Where Musk has shown a zeal for smash and grab, Vought has the institutional knowledge—and perhaps the patience—to make the DOGE cuts stick. Vought, this person says, “is waiting in the wings.”



Vought, second from left, Trump, right, and other administration officials leaving a White House press briefing in 2020. *Photographer: Brendan Smialowski/AFP/Getty Images*

Vought grew up in Trumbull, in southwest Connecticut, though his family didn't fit the stereotype of the wealthy suburb. He was one of seven children in a churchgoing family of modest means. Vought's father, a Marine veteran, worked as an electrician; his mother was a public school teacher who later co-founded a Christian elementary school. Vought has said almost nothing about his childhood, except that money was tight and faith was extremely important. "My mom led me to the Lord when I was 4 years old," he recalled in a 2023 podcast interview. He belonged to a "really strong Bible-preaching, Bible-teaching church," went to Christian summer camps, a private Christian school in Trumbull and, later, to Wheaton College, an evangelical institution just outside Chicago.

Vought was hardly a right-wing ideologue in his college years. He ran for student body vice president in 1997, on a ticket that supported commitment to improving recycling and to liberalizing the school's rigid social codes, which generally restricted men and women from visiting each other's dorm rooms unsupervised. He and his running mate promised "a realistic yet hopeful set of goals in the quest to connect students with their administrative leaders," according to a candidate statement published in the college paper. Vought lost that race but wasn't put off politics. The following year, he interned for his local congressman, Republican Chris Shays, before landing in 1999 as a legislative correspondent in the office of Senator Phil Gramm.

Gramm, a Texas Republican and curmudgeonly economist, first made his name as one of America's chief deficit hawks in the 1980s. "Everybody who wants something from the government is looking over their congressman's left shoulder, sending letters about the needs of the poor, the sick, the bicycle rider, whoever," says Gramm, now 82, explaining what he saw as the predicament. "The taxpayer is out there working, trying to make a living, and he ain't got the time. So you've got this terrible imbalance." Gramm is most famous for a bill, signed by President Ronald Reagan in 1985, that got lawmakers to agree that if they couldn't figure out how to get below a preset spending target, the White House would be forced to enact across-the-board cuts without congressional approval, a process known as sequestration.



Gramm, center, shaking hands with President Reagan, left, after the passage of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings Budget Bill in 1985. *Photographer: Diana Walker/Getty Images*

In 1990, however, Congress rewrote the law to be less severe, and President George H.W. Bush agreed to raise taxes. By the time Gramm met Vought, the dot-com bubble was driving up federal tax revenue to such an extent that Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan would eventually warn about the dangers of excessive budget surpluses. Deficit concerns seemed quaint, and Gramm found himself marginalized, including among Republicans. Steve McMillin, Gramm's former legislative director and later an OMB deputy director under George W. Bush, recalls his boss and fellow travelers being "voices in the wilderness."

Vought was doing a grunt-work job in that wilderness, responding to letters from Gramm's constituents, but he stood out as thoughtful and driven. "He was smart, and he paid attention," Gramm says. "We probably gave him more responsibility than we did most people with his lack of experience." Early on in his Washington years, Vought also briefly worked a second job as a clerk at a local B. Dalton bookstore and later began taking law school classes at night. Around 2001, when Gramm offered Vought a promotion to legislative assistant—a job with longer and more unpredictable hours—he accepted and told McMillin that he was ready to drop out of George Washington University's law school to devote himself fully to the new job. McMillin told Vought that was ridiculous; Vought received his JD three years later. "That he was ready to make a sacrifice," McMillin says, "really, really stuck with us."

"We don't have the time to fiddle at the edges"

Gramm's politics rubbed off on Vought too. He adopted Gramm's catchphrases, including "wagon pullers" (taxpayers) and "wagon riders" (people relying on government assistance). He also started using what Gramm called the Dickey Flatt Test: evaluating whether a proposed government program was worth the money by thinking like the average taxpayer—in this case, a small-business owner in Gramm's home state. Here the two men's philosophies diverged. Where Gramm framed the question largely in libertarian terms (don't tax unless you have to), Vought applied a cultural lens, placing more emphasis on the perils of using government money to fund left-wing projects. "That, too, is an angle that really animates Russ," McMillin says.

Vought spent several years working for a Gramm protégé, Jeb Hensarling, then served as executive director of the Republican Study Committee, a right-wing caucus. It was the "center of conservative gravity in the House," Hensarling says. He recalls Vought as a "true believer" with a "mastery of details of really arcane budget processes." Vought left Congress in 2010 and went to work as vice president of Heritage Action for America, the lobbying arm of the Heritage Foundation. There he took up another of Gramm's favorite pastimes: calling Congress gutless.

In a series of essays for Red State, the commentary site run by conservative radio host Erick Erickson, Vought railed against congressional Republicans for, as he saw it, failing to block President Barack Obama's agenda. This position played well during the heyday of the Tea Party, when many conservatives suddenly became deficit hawks. Vought was ready to make the case for big changes. "We are past the point of incrementalism," he wrote in 2011. "We don't have the time to fiddle at the edges. We need elected officials free of calcified political assumptions of what is possible that reveal only their own level of accommodation with the liberal welfare state."

If Vought's time with Gramm transformed him into a fiscal hawk, his views on executive power came into focus during Trump's first term. Vought entered the administration, initially as the deputy director of the OMB, with some notable enemies. Along with his attacks on moderate Republicans, he'd written an essay in 2016 about Wheaton, his alma mater. At the time, the college was attempting to fire a professor, Larycia Hawkins, who'd said Muslims "worship the same God" as Christians. Vought wrote in support of Hawkins' firing. "Muslims do not simply have a deficient theology," he wrote. "They do not know God." Vought's point was a narrow theological one, though it was clear from his essay that at least part of his objection to Hawkins was political. He complained that Hawkins, the college's first tenured Black professor, was "in complete activist mode" and that she'd held a press conference with the Reverend Jesse Jackson—behavior he considered "not becoming of an employee of a Christian institution." Hawkins ultimately resigned, though Wheaton's provost has apologized for his handling of her case.

During Vought's 2017 confirmation hearing, Senator Bernie Sanders used the essay as an example of Trump's divisiveness. Noting that there are millions of American Muslims, Sanders asked, "Are you suggesting that all of those people stand condemned? What about Jews? Do they stand condemned too?" Vought maintained his composure and stonewalled. "Senator, I am a Christian," he said, repeatedly. Sanders pressed, his voice rising: "This nominee is really not someone who is what this country is supposed to be about." After he was confirmed, Vought used the exchange as a see-I-told-you to fellow travelers in a populist ideology sometimes called "Christian nationalism"—the idea that the US should more narrowly interpret the constitutional separation of church and state and be

governed as an explicitly Christian nation. Vought later called Sanders' comments a "warning shot to Christians across the country."

Vought approached his tenure at the OMB, first as deputy director and later as director, with the zeal of an activist. "The left has innovated over 100 years to create this fourth branch" of government, he told the right-wing talk show host Tucker Carlson in a late 2024 interview, in recalling his work during the first Trump administration. "You and I might call it 'the regime'—this administrative state that is totally unaccountable to the president." The notion of a secret "regime" controlled by what Vought described as an unholy alliance of lobbyists, corrupt members of Congress, media elite and intelligence agencies became popular among members of the far right as a way to explain Trump's ineffectiveness during his first term. As Vought saw it, the main job of the OMB was to "tame the bureaucracy" and "bring them to heel to do what the president is telling them to do."

"You've got to know how to fire them"

Perhaps by design, many of the budget office's career staffers felt like they'd stepped into the Twilight Zone. "OMB is an unusual part of the White House in that the career people really believe themselves to be loyal to the civil service—that they are there to serve whatever administration is in place, but that their highest loyalty is to good process," says Sharon Block, who worked at the OMB under Biden and is now a Harvard Law School professor. "They would never say we shouldn't do something because it's bad policy. They would say we shouldn't do it because it's not going to work." Vought's approach, in the face of this resistance, was basically to ignore it. "They were willing to flagrantly misread the law," says Kogan, the other former Biden appointee. "That's what Trump's OMB was."

In Vought's telling, he wasn't misreading the law; he was thinking creatively to find a legal basis to help Trump achieve his goals. In other words, he was doing exactly what you'd expect of a loyal political appointee. Vought's signature achievement involved overcoming the refusal of congressional Democrats to back Trump's plans to spend billions of dollars on the construction of new fencing along the US-Mexico border. The dispute led to a government shutdown starting in late 2018, which ended with Trump giving up his demand for wall funding. Vought found more than $3 billion in funding anyway, by encouraging Trump to declare a state of emergency and then dipping into an emergency Department of Defense construction budget. Vought later complained that career officials had repeatedly attempted to block his maneuver as potentially illegal. "I must have had, at least three times, someone relitigate that decision," Vought told Carlson, complaining that career staff repeatedly suggested that the OMB should oppose the move. Vought's response: "Guys, the decision has been made. Execute the decision."

As a legal matter, career staffers had a point. Federal courts almost immediately blocked the funds, though the Supreme Court later allowed construction to proceed, and the success only hardened Vought's view of executive authority. Later that year he temporarily withheld hundreds of millions of dollars in funding, appropriated by Congress, for aid to Ukraine. For Vought the decision was simple; he was following Trump's wishes. "I had been personally told, 'Look, I want the money cut off until we can figure out where it's going,' " Vought told Carlson. "And we got the money cut off."

It was an odd account of the episode, partly because the decision to cut off funds to Ukraine, shortly after a call in which Trump seemed to make military aid contingent on an investigation of Hunter

Biden, turned out to be politically disastrous and led to the president's impeachment. (He was acquitted by the Senate.) Beyond the allegation of a quid pro quo was the question of whether a president could simply cut off money that Congress had appropriated. The Government Accountability Office would later agree with the career officials who'd said the OMB was breaking the law by withholding funds. In Vought's telling, though, this was all evidence of a deep state hell-bent on disobeying anyone it disagreed with. "Why wouldn't you just fire the people who disobey?" Carlson asked during the 2024 interview.

Vought nodded gravely. "You've got to know how to fire them."

After Jan. 6, many senior administration officials either resigned or tried to put distance between themselves and Trump. Vought stayed at the White House until the very end, then immediately launched his own think tank dedicated to vigorously pushing back. The Center for Renewing America, Vought wrote in an essay for The Federalist in January 2021, would sustain what he called "the counter assault" by linking Trumpism with Christian values.

The idea that Musk could be the linchpin for Vought's counterassault seemed outrageous even a few months ago to most people, though not to Vought's allies. The day after Trump told a meeting of the Economic Club of New York that he was creating a government efficiency commission and that he'd put Musk in charge, a longtime Vought aide weighed in with a procedural suggestion.

"Impound, baby, impound!" wrote Mark Paoletta in an X post that tagged Musk. Paoletta, who served as the OMB general counsel under Vought (and has since returned to that post), was referring to the idea of impoundment, whereby a president declines to spend money that Congress has appropriated. He suggested Musk could use the tactic "as a tool" to "find savings." Vought's think tank had published numerous papers suggesting just such an approach, one of which Paoletta included in his message to Musk. In the weeks that followed, Musk repeatedly brought up the idea of using DOGE to unilaterally withhold funds and mentioned impoundment in a Wall Street Journal opinion piece in November 2024.

There was a wrinkle to this—namely that impoundment is more or less illegal, even under a narrow interpretation of the Constitution favored by Vought and Paoletta. That's because in 1974, after President Richard Nixon refused to implement the Clean Water Act, Congress passed a law essentially barring presidents from using the tactic in most cases. (Vought acknowledged this during his confirmation hearing in February, though he also noted that Trump believes the 1974 law is unconstitutional.) A related legal problem is that most of the government departments Musk has sought to cut were established by Congress—including the CFPB and USAID—meaning many of DOGE's actions could be seen as violating not only the Impoundment Control Act of 1974 but also whatever law created the agency in question.

That's been enough to blunt much of what Musk has sought to do. Over the past two months, federal judges have blocked attempts to lay off probationary employees, collect Social Security Administration records and access the Treasury Department's payment system, among other things. (Some of the court orders, including ones involving the payment system and some of the layoffs, have been reversed on appeal; in early April an appeals court lifted an injunction that had stopped Musk from playing a role in USAID.) All the cases are ongoing, and Musk's public statements feature prominently in many of them.

In the case of Vought's actions at the CFPB, Musk's comments seemed to be an important factor in undermining the government's case.

On March 28, Amy Berman Jackson, an Obama-appointed district court judge, issued a preliminary injunction reinstating fired employees and preventing Vought from making further cuts to the CFPB. Jackson's 112-page opinion opened by quoting from Musk's post with the tombstone emoji. "There is no mystery about what is going on," she wrote, describing "a hurried effort to dismantle and disable the agency entirely" under the guise of cutting costs. She noted that Vought's actions were "taken in complete disregard for the decision Congress made 15 years ago, which was spurred by the devastating financial crisis of 2008 and embodied in the United States Code, that the agency must exist and that it must perform specific functions to protect the borrowing public." Administration lawyers are appealing.

It's possible that Jackson's ruling will prove a temporary setback to Vought and that DOGE's work so far will ultimately serve as a prelude to even more dramatic cost-cutting. In Project 2025, Vought suggested that the OMB should give political appointees control over how funding is apportioned to federal agencies. The apportionment process was originally intended to make sure agencies don't spend money too fast and have to come back to Congress for more. Vought argued that it should also be used to cut wasteful spending "and ensure consistency with the President's agenda."

Based on this, Kogan says Vought could order political appointees to cut a set amount of funding from an agency's budget based on a finding from DOGE or even just one of Musk's social media posts. Such a move would seem to be illegal under the Impoundment Control Act. In 2022, partly in response to Vought's role in the freezing of Ukraine funding, Congress passed a law requiring OMB to disclose its apportionments on a public website. But in late March, that website went offline without explanation. "What they're doing is illegally hiding the ball," Kogan says. The website takedown is the subject of yet another lawsuit, filed on April 8 by a left-leaning watchdog group.

Vought declined to comment. A person familiar with his thinking says that Vought sees Musk as a "force multiplier" and that DOGE's actions so far—such as the cancellation of government contracts, the mass layoffs, the seizures of buildings from agencies —don't amount to illegal impoundment under the Nixon-era law. At his confirmation hearing in early April, Trump's nominee for OMB deputy director, Eric Ueland, told a Senate committee that Vought intends to formally ask Congress to approve at least some of the budget cuts via what's known as a rescission package.

For now, it's not clear how much cost-cutting Musk has actually achieved or how lasting Vought's efforts to traumatize the federal workforce will prove to be. Farman says she and her colleagues are resolved not to quit, to not give in to what she sees as Vought's deliberate effort to discourage them. On the other hand, she's discouraged. Vought hasn't been able to fire her or the other members of her union, but he's effectively paralyzed the CFPB. Many of the agency's cases against financial institutions accused of defrauding customers have already been dropped, with no real prospect of ever being reopened.

Meanwhile, the CFPB, like much of the federal government under Trump, exists in a sort of limbo, officially open for business but not really working. Even with the win in court, "it's hard to imagine

how we could get back to the status quo," Farman says. "Things are still broken."—*With Gregory Korte and Joshua Green*