Elon Musk Does Not Understand Why

Government Matters



Illustration by Rebecca Chew/The New York Times

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By The Editorial Board

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Elon Musk's life is a great American success story. Time and again, he has anticipated where the world was headed, helping to create not just new products but new industries. His achievements, from his pioneering role in online payments to the construction of SpaceX's satellite network to the mass production of electric Teslas, have made him the world's wealthiest man.

But Mr. Musk's fortune rests on more than his individual talent. He built his business empire in a nation with a stable political system and an unwavering commitment to the rule of law, and he built it on a foundation of federal subsidies, loans and contracts. Mr. Musk's companies have received at least $38 billion in government support, according to an analysis by The Washington Post. NASA has invested more than $15 billion in SpaceX; Tesla has collected $11 billion in subsidies to bolster the electric car industry.

Now, as an influential adviser to President Trump, Mr. Musk is lawlessly tearing down parts of the very government that enabled his rise. As the head of an agency he conjured and named the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, Mr. Musk has suspended billions of dollars in spending and discarded thousands of scientists, regulators and other government workers. Brandishing a chain saw during a recent appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference, he shouted: "This is the chain saw for bureaucracy. Chain saw!"

Mr. Musk claims that the government is a business in need of disruption and that his goal is to eliminate waste and improve efficiency. And he's right: The federal government is often wasteful and inefficient. Taxpayers, business owners and recipients of federal benefits all know the frustration of navigating the federal bureaucracy. There

are huge opportunities, in particular, for the government to make better use of technology.

But DOGE is not building a better government. Instead, its haphazard demolition campaign is undermining the basic work of government and the safety and welfare of the American people. Mr. Musk directed the firing of nuclear safety workers, necessitating a frantic effort to rehire them just days later. He ended federal funding for Ebola monitoring, and despite his subsequent acknowledgment that it might be a good idea to keep an eye on Ebola, it still has not been fully restored. The government at Mr. Musk's behest has disrupted cancer research, delayed work on transportation projects and sought to close the agency established after the 2008 financial crisis to protect consumers from being robbed by banks.

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Even worse is that Mr. Musk, with Mr. Trump's support, has demonstrated a disregard for the limits that the Constitution places on the president's power. Mr. Musk and Mr. Trump insist that voters want change. DOGE's slogan is "The people voted for major reform." But in their campaign to shrink the federal government, Mr. Musk and Mr. Trump have defied laws passed by Congress, and they have challenged the authority of the federal courts to adjudicate the legality of their actions. Mr. Trump recently referred to himself as a king and then insisted he had been joking, but there is no ambiguity in his assertion of the power to defy other branches of government. It is a rejection of the checks and balances that have safeguarded our nation for more than 200 years. Mr. Musk and Mr. Trump are not trying to change laws; they are upending the rule of law.

Even where Mr. Musk's actions have remained within the bounds of the law, he has shown little understanding of the differences between business and government. Mr. Musk built his rocket company, SpaceX, by repeatedly launching rockets that failed until he learned how to launch rockets that worked. Even now, the company often conducts experiments that fail, and Mr. Musk has argued, compellingly, that "if things are not failing, you are not innovating enough." But managing the nation's air traffic control system or its Social Security payment system requires a different calculus.

Businesses can take risks in pursuit of profit because it's OK if they fail. Americans can't afford for the basic functions of government to fail. If Twitter stops working, people can't tweet. When government services break down, people can die. While governments are often guilty of inefficiency, it is in the public interest to tolerate some inefficiency when the alternative is a breakdown of basic infrastructure.

Editors' Picks



Every Move I Make, She'll Be Watching Me



From Her Past Comes the Drive to Help Other Indigenous Women



How Do You Like Your History? With Imaginative Leaps or Grounded in Fact?

“I think we’re just moving a little too fast,” Representative Rich McCormick, Republican of Georgia, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution in late February after constituents booed him at a town-hall meeting. He suggested the Trump administration should pause to think before acting. “We’re moving really, really rapidly, and we don’t know the impact.”

Mr. Trump, responding to similar concerns from members of his administration, reportedly said at a cabinet meeting on Thursday that cabinet secretaries would be in charge of future cuts in their departments and that Mr. Musk would be restricted to an advisory role. But it remains to be seen whether that will happen.

Our system of government is obdurate by design. It is stable even by comparison with other democracies, many of which are governed by parliamentary systems in which the results of a single election can sharply shift public policy. In the United States, where power is divided among three coequal branches of government, it is relatively rare for one political party to gain such sweeping power for any period.

The stability of the nation’s laws, and of the government’s role, has caused frustration throughout American history. It is also a kind of secret sauce, facilitating the private-sector investment and risk taking that are the wellspring of the nation’s prosperity.

That stability is now under assault. The United States has experienced a marked increase in political volatility and even political violence, most notably in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election and in the assassination attempts against Mr. Trump. The World Bank’s index of political stability ranked the United States in the 66th

percentile of all nations in 2013. By 2023, it had dropped into the bottom half of the rankings.

Research has shown that even small declines in political stability can deliver enduring blows to economic growth, mostly by discouraging investment. In a chaotic environment, like post-Brexit Britain or Mr. Trump's America, entrepreneurs are less likely to pursue big ideas, and investors will hesitate to make long-term commitments.

DOGE, of course, is merely one way that Mr. Trump has increased instability, along with his flurry of executive orders purporting to rewrite environmental policy, the meaning of the 14th Amendment and more; his on-again-off-again tariffs; and his inversion of American foreign policy, wooing Vladimir Putin while disdaining longtime allies.

Mr. Musk has made clear that he holds caution in contempt. But the president, whose power Mr. Musk is wielding, should listen to those in his party who are raising concerns about Mr. Musk's methods and priorities. There are already signs that the chaos is hurting the economy. Inflation expectations have risen; stock prices have tumbled. Americans like to take risks; to do so, they need a government that is steady and reliable.