Elon Musk the most powerful maniac civilian since Rasputin?

The SpaceX owner's political influence has soared but, like history's other disruptors, it's a test of where the power lies in a democracy

Has anyone outside politics – the people some politicians, among themselves, call 'civilians' – had such an effect on the political process as Elon Musk? The richest man in the world (and money has long helped buy influence) is about to become co-director of the new Department of Government Efficiency (Doge) in Washington DC. However, the department and he will, according to President-Elect Trump, operate outside government. Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, with whom he will lead Doge, have said they will "serve as outside volunteers, not federal officials or employees".

This spares Musk the constraints of cabinet membership, such as surrendering day-to-day control of his business interests, obeying collective responsibility, diluting his all-pervasive presence on X (formerly Twitter) and, perhaps above all, having to end his interference in the politics of other countries, including ours. It appears the best of all worlds for Musk, until and unless it becomes the worst of all worlds for Trump: at which point we shall see where, in a democracy, power really lies.

Can Musk navigate the delicate balance of power with Donald Trump? Credit: Getty Images

History is scattered with 'civilians' for whom self-regard and extreme wealth fed a sense of megalomania that made them think they should, and could, change the political process. Sometimes they managed to stay

on the right side of the line of propriety and, by using their wealth to do good works, did great public services. Sometimes their power came through displaying huge moral courage that inspired a following, and not wealth, and they circumvented the political class and changed the world for the better. Often it ended badly, in degrees of humiliation or even death, as their determination to influence statecraft met resistance or ridicule from those supporting conventional politics.

Take, for example, Grigory Rasputin, the Russian priest who exerted huge influence over Alexandra, the last Tsarina of Russia, and thence over the Tsar and, in an autocracy, the government of Russia. Rasputin's value to the Tsarina was that he passed himself off as a faith healer. She became obsessed with the possibility of his curing the Tsarevich, Nicholas II's only son, a haemophiliac. Rasputin inveigled his way into the Tsarina's confidence after the 1905 revolution. Within a decade he was the prime influence over her, and through her over the Tsar. Nicholas's direction of Russia's campaign in the Great War was by 1916 increasingly disastrous, and a powerful faction at court apportioned the blame to Rasputin's influence, and decided to kill him. There were also rumours that he had magnified his influence by seducing the Tsarina and four grand duchesses. One of the most widely known 'facts' about him is that he proved hard to murder: having failed to kill him with cakes and Madeira laced with cyanide, his assassins supposedly shot him three times. That still didn't work, so they drowned him. The story is probably a concoction, but nonetheless a salutary lesson to overmighty subjects.

Is Musk the modern-day Rasputin? Credit: Hulton Archive

At that time Britain had its own civilian disruptor. The press baron Lord Northcliffe owned the Daily Mail and The Times, exerting influence on all levels of society. A Conservative government had ennobled him for services rendered: but during the Great War he became determined that Lloyd George, a Liberal in charge of a Conservative-dominated coalition, would take orders from him as some sort of tribune of his readership. He was humoured to start with, and given an envoy role to the United States:

but when he started insisting Lloyd George make policy and appointments according to his wishes, the prime minister cut him off savagely. Discussing Northcliffe in the Commons, Lloyd George tapped his brow as if to indicate his adversary was not right in the head. Northcliffe's mental health unquestionably imploded before his death, possibly from syphilis, in 1922. An orthodox political system was too strong for him to defeat. His American counterpart was William Randolph Hearst, whose ethical standards exerting influence through his press ownership were even lower than Northcliffe's. He tried and failed to become president of the United States in 1904; and similarly failed in the same decade to become mayor of New York and governor of New York state. Later, he used his papers to push isolationism, and in the 1930s ordered his editors to support Nazism. He built, but never finished, a castle on the coast of his native California, a symbol of his megalomania. He inspired Citizen Kane. He projected a distorted world view to tens of millions of Americans, and the difficulties Roosevelt had in ending isolationism were not least down to Hearst. But, as with Northcliffe, he could not in the end trump the power of a leader with a popular mandate.

William Randolph Hearst had his eyes on the White House, but was never able to achieve his goal Credit: Corbis via Getty Images

Some wealthy Americans of that era used their extreme wealth to create a culture of philanthropy and social improvement: notably John D Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil and possibly as rich as Musk, who as well as funding health care and education also played an enormous role in transforming the culture of American south, with its institutional discrimination against black people. He was certainly a ruthless businessman, but he never sought to shape the political process: he was content with the power he could exercise through wealth alone. Scottish-born Andrew Carnegie was even richer than Rockefeller, and although a member of the Republican party rarely became overtly political. His most ideological causes were anti-imperialism and the pursuit of world peace. He used his money to further health and education, and founded many libraries. In today's money he gave away around $11 billion. Like

Rockefeller, he left politics to politicians, in an era when politicians left businessmen largely alone. Bill Gates appears to follow this model.

Sometimes rich men act in a way that has a political impact. George Soros's ditching of Sterling in 1992 helped create Black Wednesday, drove Britain out of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism and, as a consequence, made it politically impossible for the country to join the euro when it was launched in 1999. Sometimes political impact comes from civilians blessed with moral force: Nelson Mandela, or Charles de Gaulle, a career soldier who took a political role to defeat Nazism and, later, after a 12-year internal exile, saved France from domestic turmoil and created the fifth Republic. But he did so from inside the system, as Mandela eventually could.

The contemporary version of the civilian political influencer is often a celebrity. George Clooney played a part, it seems, in forcing Joe Biden to withdraw from last year's presidential race; he was less successful in ensuring the victory of his favoured candidate, which showed the limits of Hollywood's influence among less privileged people. We had a poundshop Clooney in the shape of Gary Lineker, whom even the BBC seems to believe has entertained us enough.

Has Hollywood's political influence waned? Credit: Instagram

Musk's influence in Britain has suffered a serious haemorrhage in recent days. He has, remarkably, unified disparate factions here by presuming to interfere in our politics. He has demonstrated his complete ignorance of how we conduct those politics. Word from the Trump Transition Team is that Musk thinks he is 'co-president' or even, really, the president himself – and many of them don't like it.

As the biggest donor to the Trump campaign, he is being indulged for the moment. That moment, given his behaviour is erratic even by the culture of the president he is notionally serving, may not last that long.