

CHOOSE YOUR OVERLORD

Musk vs. Bezos
By Josh Tyrangiel



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THE ADRIATIC HAS been crossed by Odysseus and Caesar, by Venetian fleets and Napoleon's navy, by countless men bent on dominating the world. It has seen its share of courage and folly. But one day in June 2025, off the island of Cres, it witnessed something genuinely new: a man worth $240 billion standing waist-deep in bubbles on the deck of a $500 million yacht, wearing a white bucket hat.

The man is Jeff Bezos, and the woman photographed in the string bikini next to him—hugging him, rubbing him with bubbles—is his fiancée, Lauren Sánchez. Bezos is shirtless, and it must be said: He is ripped. His hairless torso is so buff, his

expression so amused, that he looks more like a louche cartoon character—a Club Med Ninja Turtle—than a 61-year-old corporate executive. In the foreground, an anonymous crew member, his face hidden from view and his thoughts forever unknown, mans a cannon blasting bubbles into the Croatian sky.

The foam party was a birthday celebration for Sánchez's 19-year-old son, a prelude to the Bezos-Sánchez wedding five days later in Venice—with 200 VIP guests, hundreds of protesters, and an estimated cost of $50 million. The wedding consumed the internet for a week and was treated as a self-contained cultural event, a thing worth interrogating or gawking at on its own terms.

In fact it was the culmination of one of the weirder decades that any American billionaire has ever had. The whole republic, to be fair, has been pretty nuts, and Bezos has been both caught up in the insanity and an agent of its acceleration.

In 2013, Bezos, who founded Amazon and still owns roughly 8 percent of the company, purchased The Washington Post for $250 million. Two years later, Donald Trump accused him of using the paper as a tax shelter, to which Bezos jokingly responded that Trump should be launched into space. Trump then said at a rally, “If I become president, oh, do they have problems.” Trump became president, and the Pentagon steered a massive cloud-computing contract away from Amazon Web Services, while Trump repeatedly pressured the U.S. Postal Service to raise Amazon’s shipping rates.

In 2019, Bezos and his wife, MacKenzie, announced their decision to divorce. A month later, Bezos accused the National Enquirer’s parent company of attempted extortion after he said it threatened to release intimate photos, including what its chief content officer described in an email as a “below the belt selfie —otherwise colloquially known as a ‘d*ck pick.’” (The company said it had “acted lawfully” but would conduct its own investigation.) This is how much of the world learned about Lauren Sánchez, which was awkward because her brother

Michael, a court later determined, had spoken with the tabloid about his sister's relationship and sold—for $200,000—information, text messages, and a number of Bezos's "'racy,' 'explicit' photos." Bezos suggested, without evidence, that the plot had been instigated by the Trump administration and the Saudi government in retaliation for the Post's reporting on the murder of its columnist Jamal Khashoggi by the Saudis.

That's already a lot, even by billionaire standards.

Bezos then stepped down as CEO of Amazon in 2021; went to space aboard a rocket built by Blue Origin, the aerospace company he'd quietly founded two decades earlier; and began devoting the majority of his time to the company. Over roughly the same period, he commissioned the world's largest sailing yacht and worked on building a 10,000-year clock inside a mountain. By the time of his second wedding, Bezos had transformed physically and politically—killing a Post endorsement of Kamala Harris for president, attending Donald Trump's second inauguration in a seat of honor, reorienting the paper's Opinion section around "personal liberties and free

markets," cheerleading Amazon's reported $40 million deal for a documentary and future docuseries about Melania Trump.

People change. And if Bezos were just another middle-aged guy using his money to become unrecognizable to his former self—God bless. Enjoy the Met Gala.



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But we live in a society where trivializing the actions of our wealthiest citizens is both unbeatable fun and a form of recklessness. For most of the past decade, the changes in Bezos that attracted attention were the meme-able ones: his body, his partner, his yacht. This made the transformation that mattered harder to see. We've been gawking at Bezos becoming a different kind of billionaire while missing his attempt to become a different kind of historical figure. The man who once

rewired how the planet buys and sells everything has been chasing an even grander project—creating the infrastructure for an off-world economy upon which human civilization might someday depend.

If this sounds implausible and potentially menacing, you will not be surprised to learn that the person standing between Bezos and his ambition is the implausible and menacing Elon Musk, who has spent the past two decades building a commanding lead in space while pursuing a different vision of where humanity should go once it gets there.

Together, in fierce competition, these two billionaires are in the early stages of a race to vertically integrate the galaxy—a process that involves rockets, moon landings, enormous satellite constellations, and space-based data centers running AI models fueled by computing power that no terrestrial supplier can match. Both say they hope to preserve human life from the specter of climate change and expand mankind's understanding of the universe. Both would also like to dominate

a market that, unlike every other market they've previously conquered, has no ceiling and few established rules.

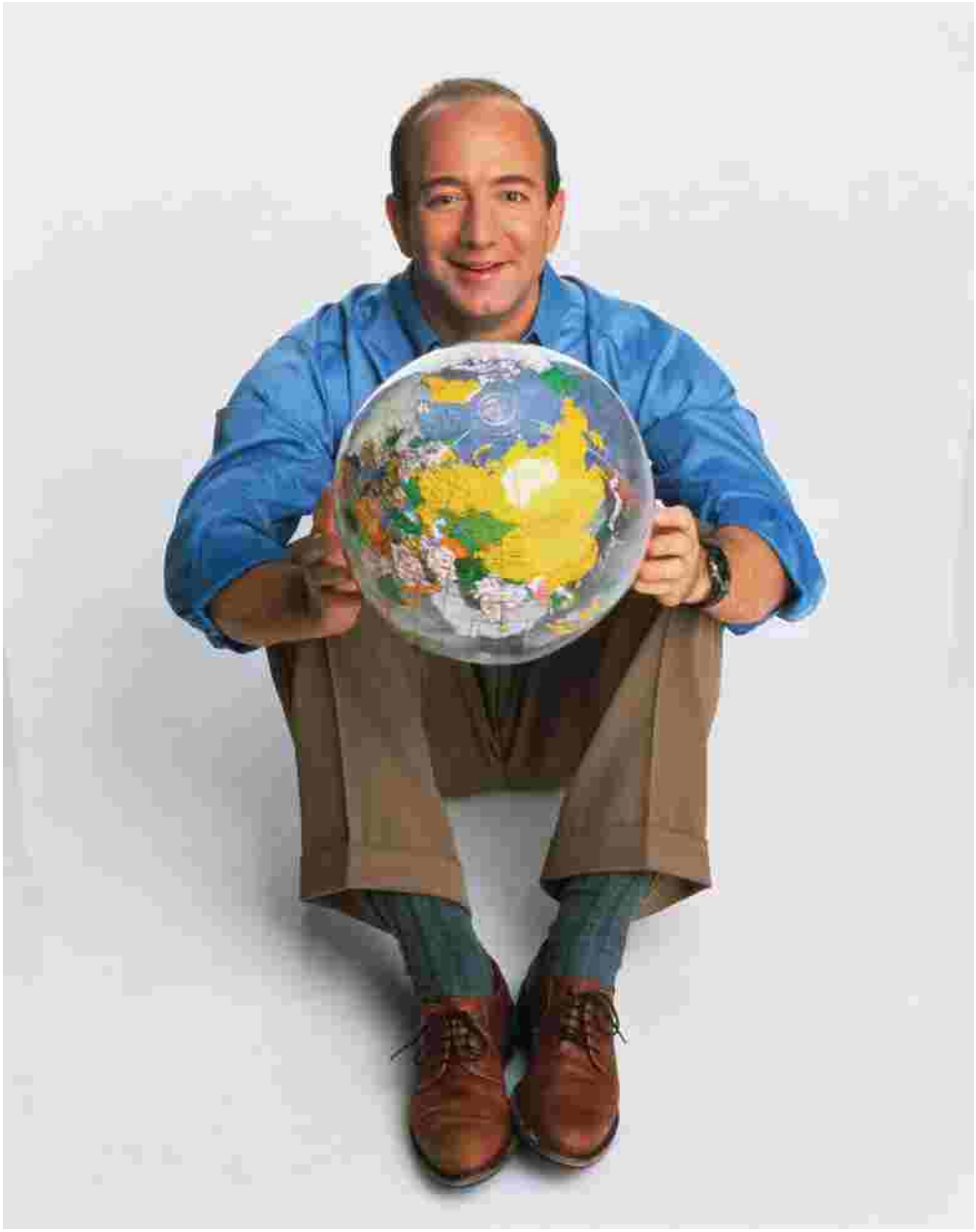
Whether any of this is wise is a question the rest of us are not really being asked. For most of human history, the power to decide where a civilization went next belonged to governments, monarchs, or despots. It's a measure of how much has changed that a retail executive from Seattle and a South African–born engineer are well positioned to exercise that power. Nobody voted for either of them. And they may be the only ones who can check the other's power. Jake Sullivan, Joe Biden's national security adviser, described this to me as "a very weird situation." You've got two men with unfathomable power and an unshakable faith that they're destined to shape the world. But neither of them is "actually Lex Luthor," Sullivan said.

" … Right?"

Perhaps not. But any answer requires a deeper understanding of the two men involved. Musk, typically, has overshared. Bezos

has been more secretive. To reveal his character and intent, you first have to get past the foam.

IN THE 1990S, when reporters began tracing the origin story of the first king of e-commerce, they made their way to Miami, where Bezos grew up, and to Ursula Werner, his high-school girlfriend. They had listened to ABBA together and he'd made her adoring flyers for her birthday, and she told those reporters something about him that, for years, seemed like just another cute bit of color: "The reason he's earning so much money," Werner said, "is to get to outer space."



Chris Carroll / Getty

Jeff Bezos in 1999

In his high-school-valedictorian speech, Bezos quoted Star Trek —“Space, the final frontier”—and asked his audience to imagine

vast orbital colonies where humanity could relocate Earth's most polluting industries, an idea cooked up by the Princeton physicist Gerard K. O'Neill in the 1970s. "The earth is finite," Bezos explained to a local reporter. "And if the world economy and population is to keep expanding, space is the only way to go."

All of this nerd enthusiasm was out in the open until 2000, when Bezos created Blue Origin Enterprises. He based the company a short commute from Amazon's Seattle headquarters and kept its existence a secret for three years, until Newsweek discovered it. This was not the only strange thing about Blue Origin.

For a while, the company's sole employee was the science-fiction writer Neal Stephenson, best known for Snow Crash, a 1992 novel set in a near-future America where the government has collapsed and corporations run everything. In a blog post, Stephenson wrote that his title at Blue Origin was "Member, Technical Staff," and that he "performed operations as prosaic as punching down Ethernet cable, operating a plate grinder, and passivating rocket parts."

But that was just part of the job. “The bulk of my efforts,” Stephenson wrote, “were devoted to investigating possible alternatives to conventional rockets.”

Bezos wanted to know if almost a century of rocket science had gotten the basic question wrong—whether there was a smarter way to get to space than attaching a tube to massive amounts of fuel and setting it all on fire. Stephenson and the handful of other employees who were eventually hired ran software simulations that would either validate the conventional approach or, Bezos hoped, find its replacement. This is a pretty wild way to spend your money.

Three years of experiments proved that Wernher von Braun and Robert Goddard hadn’t missed anything. Only then did Bezos hire the former NASA engineer Rob Meyerson and buy 165,000 acres of Texas scrub brush where rocket prototypes might someday be launched without scrutiny.

Eventually Meyerson would be promoted to president—but of what, exactly? In the early years, Blue Origin had no customers

or finished product, and little of what ordinarily makes a company a business. Bezos left the CEO job vacant and imposed no conventional timetable. It did have a tortoise mascot and a motto—“Gradatim ferociter” (“Step by step, ferociously”)—that reinforced its commitment to getting to space slowly, secretly, and stubbornly. Employees were focused on whiteboarding a tourism rocket, but Bezos told Meyerson not to worry about sales or pitching government agencies; he didn’t want to be held hostage by customers. It was “a science experiment for the first 15 years,” Tom Jones, Blue Origin’s vice president of human resources from 2016 to 2019, told me.

Contrast this with the hyper-logical way that Bezos had conceived Amazon. In an early interview, Bezos explained that the internet was growing at 2,300 percent a year; to capitalize on that growth, he needed a product category with more variety than any physical store could stock. There were more than 3 million active book titles worldwide. Therefore: books.

If Amazon was the company that Mr. Spock would create, Blue Origin was where Bezos got to lead with his heart and be

Captain Kirk. He'd take days off from Amazon for field trips, packing Blue Origin employees onto his private plane and dropping in on companies with cultures or engineering accomplishments that he admired. Gradually, Bezos cleared all of his Wednesday afternoons and many of his Saturdays to work at the Blue Origin office. When Bezos wanted to learn about heat-transfer codes—software that models how heat moves through a rocket engine; the difference between an engine that survives its own combustion and one that doesn't—Meyerson hired an employee to tutor him.

I asked Meyerson if managing Bezos's enthusiasm ever got in the way of accelerating Blue Origin's progress. "My job was to do both," he said. "The time that he put into Blue was a gift to us, because the more he understood, the more he was willing to support what was needed for the long run."

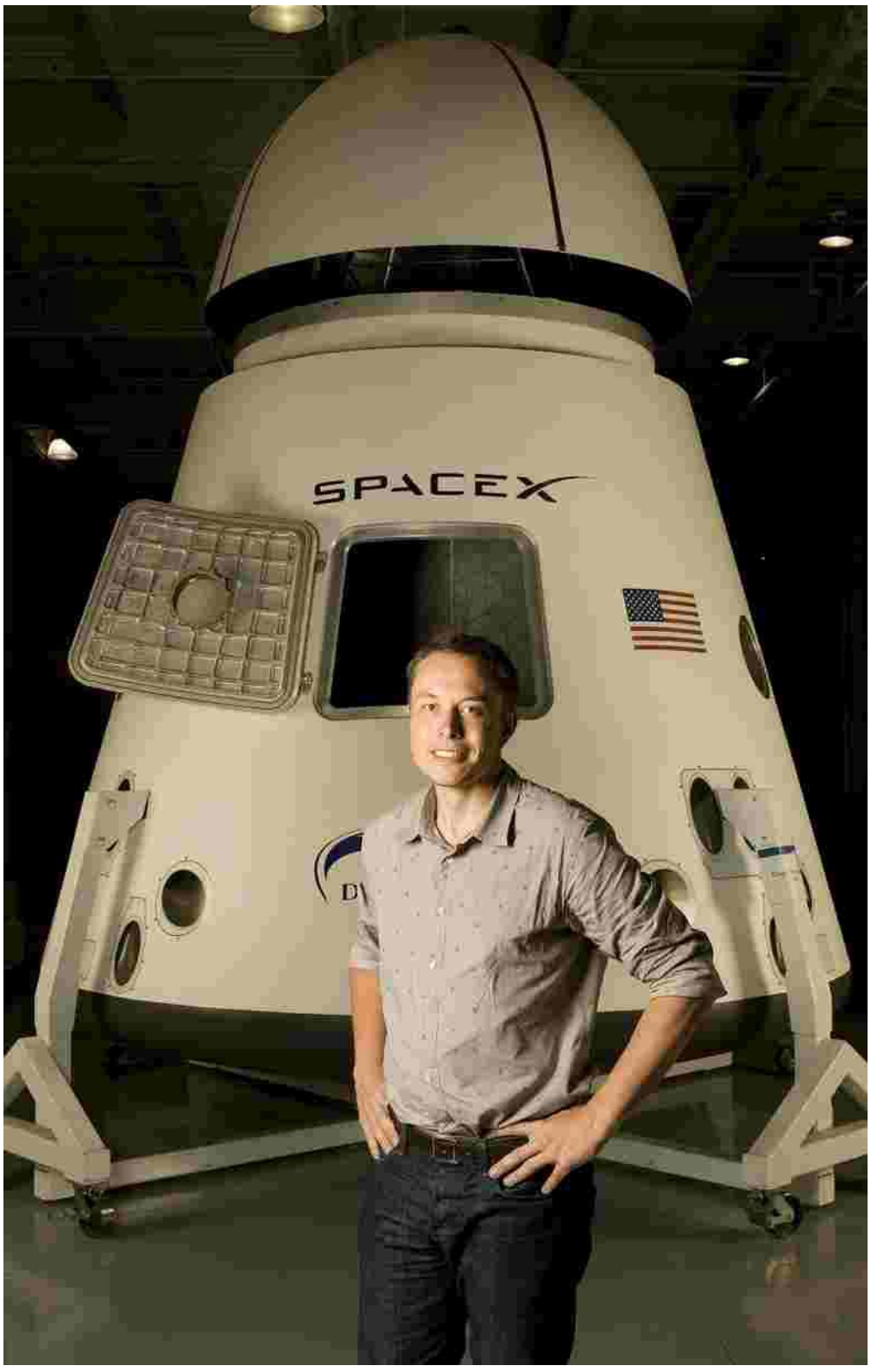
And yet, when it came to money, the accountant overruled the dreamer. Bezos was rich—Forbes's 100th-wealthiest American—but not send-my-money-to-the-moon rich. He didn't want "to spend the kind of money he's spending today," Meyerson said.

Blue Origin would work through simulations, models, and small prototypes—staying within its means until Bezos was ready to scale up.

This would have been fine if Blue Origin were operating in a vacuum. But two years after Bezos founded his dream company, someone else started a company with a dream just as large. And he was not interested in moving slowly.

IMPATIENCE IS PART of Elon Musk's mystique. So is an eagerness to break and remake things: the economics of car buying (Tesla), the operations of the federal government (DOGE), the last remaining norms of social media (X—now a platform for disturbing racial theories).

But Musk didn't set out to revolutionize aerospace and become the world's most successful rocket builder. Originally he just wanted to be a rocket buyer.



Dan Tuffs / Getty

Elon Musk in 2008 with an early model of SpaceX's Dragon capsule, designed to carry a crew or cargo into space atop a rocket

In 2001, Musk announced that he would send a robotic greenhouse into space, scoop up some Martian soil, and use it to grow a plant. This scientific publicity stunt may not go down as Musk's best idea, but his attempt to buy refurbished intercontinental ballistic missiles for the Martian-soil gambit led him to Moscow, where, according to Ashlee Vance's biography, Elon Musk, a Russian engineer spat on him (literally) and his PayPal millions. Flying back from a second unsuccessful trip, Musk opened a spreadsheet and realized that he could build a rocket for less than the $8 million the Russians wanted to charge him to buy one—and for less than anyone had ever built a rocket before. He founded SpaceX a month later.

It's easy in hindsight, and with this year's $1.8 trillion SpaceX IPO, to say that Musk had a better plan than Bezos to get to space. What's inarguable is that Musk had a faster plan. He staffed up by cold-calling college aerospace students and handing them ludicrous deadlines—the first launch was scheduled for 15 months after the company was created. Speed

gave SpaceX swagger, and that swagger gave its young employees faith. But the company's most important virtue was thrift. Not as a means of preserving Musk's wealth, but because lowering costs was the entire point of the business.

For decades, getting a person or a satellite into orbit was so expensive that only governments and the largest defense contractors could afford it. Musk believed that this had little to do with physics; unlike Bezos, he spent no time wondering whether there might be a fundamentally different way to get to space. Instead, he looked at launch costs the way a deregulator might have looked at long-distance telephone rates in the 1970s: not as a law of nature, but as the product of the people who had gotten there first and decided what to charge.

If SpaceX could create a reusable rocket capable of driving launch costs down far enough, it wouldn't just swallow all the existing demand—it would transform space from a cartel into a free market. Satellite builders, scientists, start-ups, and, eventually, anyone with a payload and a business case could

participate. Access to space would become as abundant as telephony. And then all sorts of innovation might happen.

Bezos had a similar vision, and both men believed that reusable rockets were the key to making space affordable. But while Blue Origin was moving step by step, SpaceX skipped every step it could. Employees were celebrated for outrageous hacks, such as figuring out that off-the-shelf car-wash valves worked just fine for rockets if you swapped their seals. All of that ingenuity led to Musk's promise that SpaceX's first rocket, Falcon 1, would carry a 1,400-pound payload into orbit for $6.9 million—75 percent less than any competitor.

He nearly went bankrupt doing it. The first three Falcon launches failed. By 2008, SpaceX and Tesla were burning cash. Musk was barely solvent enough to make one more launch attempt. On September 28, Falcon 1 reached orbit, making SpaceX the first privately funded company to launch a liquid-fueled rocket into space. The timing was exquisite. Three months later, as the global financial system teetered and Musk was days away from missing payroll, NASA awarded SpaceX a

$1.6 billion contract to resupply the International Space Station. The company had gone from near death to indispensable in a single quarter.

A former senior NASA official who visited both companies in their early years described Blue Origin to me as an academic lab and SpaceX as a pirate ship. “SpaceX was scrappy,” the official said. “I went to the Blue factories in Kent, Washington, and they were these beautiful, massive buildings with the world’s best 3-D printers. And I was like, Where are the people? Then you go to SpaceX in Hawthorne, and there’s these young people running around; everybody’s greasy.”

The differences were hardly lost on the people watching from Blue Origin. SpaceX had taken Amazon’s “get big fast” playbook and applied it to rockets—staffing up, sprinting to deadlines, and treating its failures as content rather than embarrassment. The launch explosions and misfires it shared on social media didn’t make SpaceX look reckless; they made it look humble. At Blue Origin, the contrast was unmistakable: SpaceX seemed to be having more fun.

SpaceX soon proved that it could reuse rocket boosters—the bottom part where the flames shoot out. Its first reusable rocket, Falcon 9, launched and landed in 2015. By May 2016, SpaceX was on its way to becoming the UPS of low Earth orbit. Satellite customers could buy launches at published prices, and Falcon 9 was beginning to fly on something approaching a regular schedule. NASA was already relying on SpaceX to shuttle cargo to the International Space Station; the Air Force had certified Falcon 9 for national-security missions and had just awarded the company its first military-launch contract.

In West Texas, Blue Origin was completing the first takeoffs and landings of its New Shepard tourism rocket. Those missions were uncrewed and suborbital—which is to say, the rocket went to space the way a ball tossed upward in a backyard goes above the roofline: fleetingly. On Twitter, Musk pointed out how far ahead SpaceX was, beginning a series of exchanges in which two of the world's richest men engaged in public rocket-measuring contests. Musk won most of these, which makes sense, because Musk was winning.

People who have worked closely with Bezos bring up two defining characteristics. The first is a comfort, bordering on delight, at being misunderstood. “I think he enjoys it,” a former Amazon senior executive told me. “You have no idea how stubborn he can be in defense of an idea only he believes. And of course a lot of times he’s right.” The second is that Bezos does not like multitasking. He’s told audiences that as a little kid in Montessori school, he was so resistant to leaving things undone that he had to be picked up in his chair and moved to the next activity. Bezos prefers to direct his focus, as intensely as possible, on one problem at a time. As long as he remained the CEO of Amazon, that problem was Amazon. For the first 15 years of Blue Origin’s existence, the company had to accommodate that reality.

Whether it was Musk’s taunts or the unignorable fact that SpaceX was racing ahead, Bezos finally changed course in 2016. During one of his regular Saturday meetings at Blue Origin, he asked a question that nobody in the room wanted to answer honestly: Why hadn’t Blue Origin directly bid on an Air Force

contract for rocket-engine development that had just gone to SpaceX? The answer: Because you've always told us not to.

Bezos delivered a new mandate to Meyerson: "From now on, we go after everything that SpaceX bids on."

WHEN PEOPLE IN AEROSPACE talk about SpaceX's advantages, they nod to Musk's maniacal expectations, his engineering instincts, and the particular quality of his attention. But Musk's attention has at times been distributed across Tesla, X, the neurotechnology company Neuralink, the tunnel start-up the Boring Company, the federal government, and 14 children by four women.

Musk's life is a browser with too many tabs. X is the tab that's always open. It's where he challenged Mark Zuckerberg to a cage match, offered to give Taylor Swift a child and guard her cats "with my life," and feuded with (partial list) Kanye West, the British government, the Australian government, the Brazilian supreme court, and a cave diver in Thailand he called a "pedo guy"—leading to a defamation lawsuit that Musk won after his

legal team argued that the phrase was a generic insult. It's also where he regularly posts memes and has promoted anti-Semitic content that makes him, justifiably, a pariah among people who believe society is plenty coarse enough without him. (SpaceX did not respond to interview requests for this story.)

The point is, Musk is no more focused than Bezos. The difference is that he's never needed to be. This is because, in 2002, he had a three-minute conversation with Gwynne Shotwell. Shotwell is 62, and remarkable in several ways—a woman in a male-dominated field, a proud former high-school cheerleader with degrees in mechanical engineering and applied mathematics. But her unique gift is the ability to read her boss's mind while ignoring his id. "I like his in-person self better than his Twitter self," Shotwell said in a 2022 talk at Stanford.

Shotwell is self-aware and funny. Not aerospace funny—actually funny. She grew up in the "boonies" north of Chicago and was a sophomore in high school when her mother dropped her off at a Society of Women Engineers event. She decided to become a

mechanical engineer that day in part because one of the presenters “had the best suit on, and she had great shoes, and her bag matched her shoes,” Shotwell told a podcast interviewer with delight.

Shotwell was in the middle of a career in traditional aerospace when she went to lunch with a former co-worker who had been poached by SpaceX. She was introduced to Musk on a tour of the office, and received a job offer to be vice president of business development that afternoon. For weeks she hesitated before pulling over on the Los Angeles freeway, calling Musk, and telling him that she was an “effing idiot” for not accepting sooner. He laughed and welcomed her to the team.

Since then, Shotwell and Musk have built one of the most drama-free partnerships in 21st-century business. He oversees engineering and technology while she takes care of everything else—sales, operations, manufacturing, workforce vibes. While Musk was supervising the 2008 do-or-die Falcon-rocket launch, Shotwell was at an industry conference in Glasgow, watching the livestream at 2 a.m. in her hotel room while writing the

company's bid to resupply the International Space Station. When the rocket reached orbit, she ran down the hallway to rouse her colleagues and broke into the hotel bar to drink warm champagne.

In 2015, having proved that SpaceX could reliably deliver payloads to space, Musk announced plans for a constellation of thousands of satellites, now known as Starlink. The pitch had a noble dimension—SpaceX would bring high-speed internet to parts of the world that fiber-optic cables had left behind. But this disguised its real purpose. SpaceX's first act—flying rockets for hire—was not profitable enough. Getting in on boring old telecommunications would give the company a way to monetize its own launch capability. Starlink was created to be the thing that would pay for everything else.

The following year, Musk revealed the full scope of his plan: SpaceX would build a fully reusable two-stage rocket and spacecraft standing just over 400 feet tall and powered by 42 engines, with a capsule—the top part—capable of carrying 100 people to Mars (or 60 Starlink satellites into orbit). "The

objective is to become a spacefaring civilization and a multiplanet species," Musk said at the time. "The main reason I'm personally accumulating assets is to fund this."

Previous spacecraft carried only what they needed for a mission. This would be like launching a Costco.

Scale is the great paradox of rocket science. A rocket twice as large as its predecessor isn't just twice as hard to build; as the rocket grows, so do the forces trying to tear it apart. At the size Musk envisioned, the fully fueled vehicle would weigh more than 10 million pounds, more than one and a half times the weight of the Saturn V, which carried astronauts to the moon. Lifting it would require engines more powerful than anything SpaceX had built before, with roughly three times the pressure of the engines powering its Falcon rockets—conditions so extreme that SpaceX would need to invent new manufacturing techniques simply to build the combustion chamber. And Musk intended to reuse everything: Both the giant booster and the spacecraft above it would return to Earth and fly again.

The design would change repeatedly—first landing legs, then enormous mechanical arms—but the economic premise remained the same. If full and rapid reuse worked, Musk believed that the cost of reaching orbit could eventually fall below $100 a kilogram, which would make the things that had always died on a spreadsheet—lunar bases, enormous satellite constellations, perhaps even human flights to Mars—possible. The architecture was elegant in its circularity. Starship, as the giant rocket and spaceship would come to be known, would make Starlink, the satellite array, far cheaper to deploy. Starlink would then generate revenue to pay for a fleet of Starships. And Starships, eventually, would get humans to Mars. Engineering, commerce, and Musk's interplanetary ambition, all stacked inside the same rocket.

PEOPLE AT BLUE ORIGIN first noticed the woman around 2018. She was seen at the Cedarbrook Lodge near the Seattle airport, a few minutes before Bezos arrived for drinks with executives. In West Texas, she began showing up as a contractor on the helicopter video team that documented New Shepard launches.

Lauren Sánchez Bezos is impossible not to notice because her lifelong goal, exuberantly pursued, is to be noticed. Sánchez Bezos grew up in New Mexico, learned she was dyslexic in community college, hustled her way into the University of Southern California, and for several years proceeded through the carnival of gigs (local news, Extra, So You Think You Can Dance) available to attractive and relentless people who want to be on television. She had a child with the former NFL tight end Tony Gonzalez before marrying Patrick Whitesell, the Hollywood agent and power broker, with whom she had two more children. In 2016, she got her helicopter pilot's license and started an aerial-production company.

The first public encounter between Bezos and Lauren Sánchez was at a December 2016 Amazon Studios party for the grim kids-die-in-a-fire movie Manchester by the Sea. It must have been like meeting Jayne Mansfield at a shiva. Both were married at the time, and what happened next seems clear enough, even without the benefit of any photos from the National Enquirer.

“Wonderful madness” is how Barry Diller, the media mogul and Bezos’s close friend, describes the relationship.

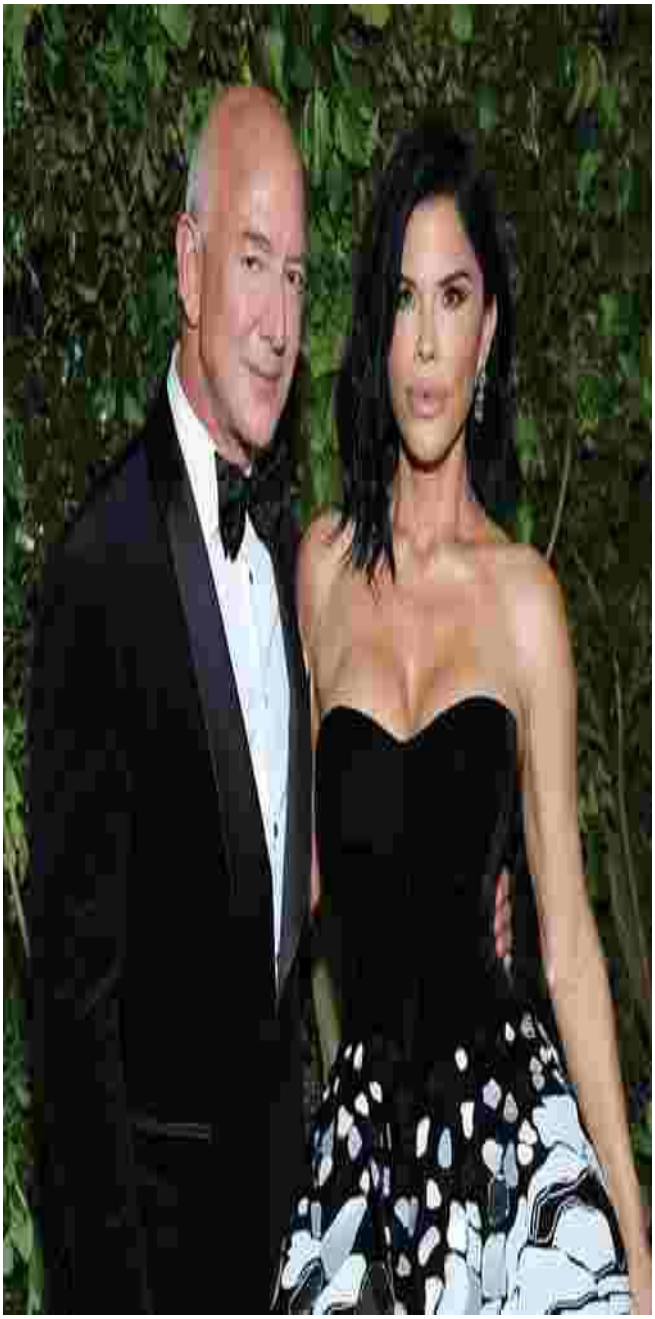
Understanding the force and fury of the response to the couple requires some unpacking, and it starts with the woman Bezos left. MacKenzie Scott studied creative writing at Princeton under Toni Morrison, did Amazon’s early bookkeeping out of Bezos’s garage, and has spent the years since their 2019 divorce giving away her share of the proceeds—more than $26 billion to more than 2,000 organizations—while largely erasing any evidence of her generosity. In August, she released a complicated third novel on Substack.

“I have great respect for and fondness for MacKenzie,” Diller told me. “You can see how she’s conducting her charitable work, which is remarkable—but it’s all quiet and private. And that’s MacKenzie.”



J. Countess / Getty

Bezos with his first wife, MacKenzie Scott, in 2005



Cindy Ord / MG24 / Getty

Bezos with Lauren Sánchez at the Met Gala in 2024

Lauren Sánchez Bezos enjoys being photographed at parties and events, and her picture is prominent on the website for the Bezos Earth Fund, a $10 billion investment in protecting “the best planet in this solar system,” where she’s vice chair. She’s

written three children's books—The Fly Who Flew to Space, The Fly Who Flew Under the Sea, and The Fly Who Flew to the North Pole—and if a brick wall were the only thing standing between her and the best-seller list, you wouldn't want to be the wall.

"People assume she's going to be Cruella, and she's not," a woman who's been friends with Sánchez Bezos for a decade told me. "She's smart and kind, and she has real accomplishments. But it's confusing because snobby people look at her big, vulgar boobs, and she's like, Yeah! Look at 'em! She likes being sexy. She just wants everyone to have a good time, and she doesn't mind being the good time."

Bezos and Sánchez Bezos make each other happy. This is not nothing, but the wonderful madness has had its costs. There was an alleged blackmail attempt to manage, a 25-year marriage to unwind, and a company that still depended on Bezos's attention. The scandal "had a huge impact at Blue Origin," Alexandra Abrams, the former head of employee communications, told me. (Abrams, who was fired in 2019, later went public with complaints about flight safety and criticized

leadership, Bezos included, for what she described as a “toxic” culture; in response, the company said it had no tolerance for discrimination or harassment and stood by its safety record.) Abrams said that the news of Bezos’s relationship with Sánchez “started to break the goodwill of a lot of the senior employees at the company. They were shocked that Jeff would comport himself in that way.”

Only Bezos can say how much of his transformation has been driven or enabled by his new wife, and how much was always there, waiting for permission. And Bezos, who declined multiple requests for an interview, isn’t talking.

A FEW WEEKS after the Manchester by the Sea party, Trump’s NASA transition team invited Blue Origin to a meeting. With Bezos’s decree to start competing, Bretton Alexander, the director of business development and strategy, scrambled to prepare.

Mike Pence was passionate about space. Trump understood the MAGA value of rockets and astronauts. So, the transition team

asked: What big idea could Blue Origin offer that would be ready by the electorally convenient date of 2020?

"I didn't see the question coming," Alexander told me. But he blurted out, "We've landed New Shepard in the desert five times in the last year. We can land something on the moon, because we have the engines and we have the technology."

The last person to walk on the moon was the Apollo 17 commander, Gene Cernan, who let a crewmate climb the ladder before him so that he could utter the following: "We leave as we came and, God willing, as we shall return, with peace and hope for all mankind." That was in 1972.

There's no single explanation for why America hasn't returned, but there are several timely reasons to go back. The moon is the most convenient place in the cosmos: three days away, without the communication lags that make deep-space operations so complicated. It has water-ice deposits, which theoretically could sustain human life and be split into hydrogen and oxygen, also known as rocket fuel. And because the moon's gravity is one-

sixth of Earth's, less fuel is required to launch from its surface and explore the rest of the solar system. For 4.5 billion years, celestial objects have used the moon as target practice, enriching the lunar soil with most every rare mineral the solar system has produced. Half its face is shielded from Earth's electromagnetic noise, which makes it valuable for radio telescopes and, as national-security officials will warn in varying degrees of specificity, potentially useful to America's adversaries. The Chinese have committed to landing astronauts on the moon by 2030.

For all of these reasons, Alexander's pitch appealed to the transition team. That it nudged federal space policy toward the moon—elevating Bezos's high-school dreams while usurping Musk, who hoped the Trump administration would back a Mars mission—was, for Blue Origin, the chef's kiss. Alexander called Rob Meyerson right away. "I said, 'Oh shit, I just created a program.'"

Greg Autry, who now leads international space policy at the State Department, was on the transition team. "We knew they

didn’t really have this thing in their garage,” Autry told me. The company had announced New Glenn, its first orbital rocket, earlier that year, but the new rocket had not even carried a commercial payload, let alone human beings. But Blue Origin had “what appeared to be a simple and relatively quick way to get there, with a reusable system.” NASA, perhaps, was also beginning to realize that having a single dominant space-launch provider might in itself be a risk.

Animosity continued between Trump and Bezos, who remained publicly critical of the president’s immigration policies. The Pentagon awarded a cloud-computing contract worth up to $10 billion to Microsoft when Amazon Web Services was the undisputed market leader. Amazon sued—and asked for Trump to be deposed, arguing that the president’s dislike of Bezos had corrupted the bidding process. (The Pentagon’s Office of Inspector General found no direct evidence of White House interference but noted that it could not complete its assessment, because senior officials had asserted “presidential communications privilege.” The suit was thrown out in 2021

when a new contract was awarded to both Amazon and Microsoft.)

But meaningful friction appears to have stopped at Blue Origin's door. A few months after Alexander's meeting, Bezos flew to Washington to personally present his company's proposal to the transition team. "That didn't necessarily happen with the other companies," Autry said. "You didn't see their CEO or funder take the time to do that." So began a drip of white papers and study contracts that, over several years, led to $592 million in government funding. Other than a 2019 meeting where Pence's chief of staff told a Blue Origin executive that the company had a "Washington Post problem"—a detail later reported in The Washington Post—no one I spoke with could recall an instance when the Trump administration's hostility toward Bezos translated into prejudice against Blue Origin.

There was plenty of turbulence at Blue Origin during this period, but it was self-inflicted, and well overdue.

AT A SATURDAY leadership-team meeting in 2017, Bezos was presented with a memo outlining Blue Origin's annual budget request. Senior leadership wanted more than $1 billion, double the current budget. All of which would come out of Bezos's pocket.

When Bezos finished reading the memo, "he walks out, doesn't say a word," Tom Jones, Blue Origin's former vice president of human resources, told me. "About 15 minutes later, he walks in and he says, 'Why did I not know that you were going to be making a request this large until today?'" Jones described Bezos as calm, even affectionate; Bezos said that he loved the people in the room but that the request was "craziness," and wildly disproportionate to their achievements. The company had convinced Washington to take its lunar ambitions seriously, but it had yet to put anything into orbit. "It's probably one of the things that might have led to him thinking, like, Okay, I've got to make a change here."

Bezos responded by bringing in Bob Smith, a veteran of the aerospace company Honeywell, as Blue Origin's first CEO in

September 2017. Smith told me he arrived at a company with no steady revenue stream and no supply chain: “Engineers would design a part, put the order out, and then it’d show up by mail back on their desk.” It was essentially “a prototype shop.”

Blue Origin might not have had a supply chain, but it did have a cosmology. Bezos “is God at Blue Origin,” Alexandra Abrams said. “Jeff’s big message was that it’s too late for climate-change efforts on Earth, and we need to be able to leave. We need to sustainably go into space and build resources, have a base on the moon, which would act as a gas station to the rest of the solar system. At the company, everyone felt like we were saving humanity.”

But God remained an intermittent presence. Bezos had tried to extract himself from Amazon for years—installing deputies, restructuring leadership. COVID wrecked that project; Amazon’s logistics network buckled in the spring of 2020, and Bezos had no choice but to dive back in. Meanwhile, Blue Origin was in the middle of a significant expansion. Bezos had authorized Smith to make thousands of new hires and build new factories, a

transformation that required exactly the kind of consistent attention he couldn’t provide. Bezos had made himself indispensable by being the only person who knew exactly what he wanted. He had never found his Gwynne Shotwell—or perhaps he’d never believed the job could be done by someone who wasn’t him. In his absence, Blue Origin was growing fast and bidding on everything, but it was still chronically late.

New Glenn, Blue Origin’s version of the Falcon, still wasn’t flying by the time SpaceX began developing Starship. SpaceX announced its Starlink constellation in 2015, put prototypes into orbit in 2018, and began deploying at scale in 2019—at which time Amazon had not yet launched a single prototype for Project Kuiper, its we-can-do-satellites-too Starlink competitor. Bezos wasn’t chasing Musk so much as arriving at places Musk had already left.

The pattern held as SpaceX started flying astronauts to the International Space Station. Blue Origin’s answer, when it finally came, was personal.

On July 5, 2021, Bezos vacated the CEO seat at Amazon. Two weeks later, he flew to space on New Shepard, the tourism rocket his company had spent years building, alongside his brother, Mark; the aviation pioneer Wally Funk; and an 18-year-old whose father, a Dutch financier, had bought him a ticket. Bezos stepped out of the capsule in the West Texas heat wearing a cowboy hat and declared it the best day ever.



Joe Raedle / Getty

Blue Origin’s New Shepard rocket lifting off in 2021, with Bezos aboard

The Bezos who returned to Blue Origin was different. He seemed determined to run the company the way he had once run Amazon—present, demanding, involved in every significant decision.

Smith’s 2023 resignation took no one by surprise. He had grown Blue Origin from roughly 850 employees to more than 10,000, accumulated billions of dollars in customer orders, and built enormous manufacturing facilities in Huntsville, Alabama, and Cape Canaveral, Florida. But New Glenn continued not to launch. And when NASA, under the Biden administration, finally awarded the contract for its Human Landing System—the moon lander that Bretton Alexander had improvised into existence—it did not go to Blue Origin. SpaceX, proposing a lunar lander based on its Starship architecture, undercut Blue Origin’s $6 billion bid by more than half.

What followed was also personal—and a little embarrassing.

Blue Origin filed a protest, prompting Musk to tweet, “Can’t get it up (to orbit) lol,” and to offer Bezos some unsolicited management advice. “I think he needs to run BO full-time for it to be successful,” Musk told The Washington Post. “Frankly, I hope he does.” Bezos offered to cover $2 billion of the lunar-lander costs, then $3 billion. When NASA ignored Bezos, Blue Origin sued. Musk, again: “You cannot sue your way to the moon.” The courts agreed. The saga ended when NASA, nudged by Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell of Washington, awarded Blue Origin a $3.4 billion contract to build a competing lander.

Bezos decided that the next person to lead Blue Origin didn’t need to understand rockets or politics; they needed to understand him. Dave Limp had run Amazon’s consumer-devices business—Kindle, Echo, Alexa—for nearly 14 years. Limp had also overseen Project Kuiper, where he pushed to spread the risk among multiple launch providers rather than depend on Blue Origin alone. He even said Amazon would be “crazy” not to consider SpaceX, given its track record.

In his final interview before accepting the job, Limp asked a single question: Was Blue Origin a hobby or a business? Because if it was a hobby, he wasn't interested. Bezos told him, "It's obviously a business. It has to be a business or it's not going to work."

DURING THE DECADE when Bezos was reorganizing his life around space, he walked away from a promise he'd made on the day he bought the Post: "The paper's duty will remain to its readers and not to the private interests of its owners."

The killing of the Harris endorsement, the subscriber cancellations, and the cascade of staff reductions—all of this has been well chronicled, because there's no beat that journalists swarm quite like a competitor's newsroom. But the core questions about Bezos and the Post remain: Why does he appear to have inverted his own promise? Was this an act of betrayal or of neglect? And, in the end, is there a difference?

When Bezos first showed up in Washington, the paper's circulation was plummeting. One former Post executive

described Bezos's 2013 arrival to me as a kind of rapture. He was a forceful presence, respectful of the wall between the editorial and business sides, but relentless about improving the customer experience. Those first two years were "absolutely fucking magical," the former executive told me. The Post went on a sustained run of profitability, and subscriptions surged throughout the first Trump administration.

But traffic and urgency declined in the Biden years, while COVID and Bezos's other interests made him a phantom in Washington. He surfaced to participate in hiring Sally Buzbee to succeed Marty Baron as executive editor in 2021. In 2023, the Post lost $77 million. Bezos surfaced again, to replace the paper's longtime publisher with Will Lewis, a British-tabloid veteran.

There were other candidates—a person close to the hiring process told me that one of them found their conversation with Bezos baffling. The Post's owner couldn't answer basic questions about the newspaper. Bezos seemed inattentive, and said that his priorities would not change: He was focused on

Blue Origin and Lauren. Bezos appeared to think that his lack of involvement would be attractive; the next publisher would have free rein.

I was a columnist at the Post for a year, and had a few conversations with Lewis early in his tenure. He'd been a journalist before entering the wolf pack of Rupert Murdoch's executive program, and among his talents was an unusual ability to throw back pints with reporters while keeping the secrets of powerful men. I found him to be a delightful, charismatic scoundrel.

Many colleagues were charmed by Lewis. But within a few months, his fury over the newsroom's coverage of accusations that he'd helped conceal or destroy evidence while managing a scandal at Murdoch's News International—accusations he has denied—had soured the dynamic. Equally concerning was that Lewis barely demonstrated any interest in his job. The Post lost $100 million in his first year—and an astonishing 60 million monthly visitors from November 2020 to November 2024. But

Bezos wasn’t paying much attention to Lewis or the newsroom; he regularly canceled meetings with top editors.

Bezos seemed more interested in the Opinion section. He never forbade the editorial board from writing what it wanted, and seldom voiced strong feelings about politicians or parties. But his interests and ideology were evolving, and as the owner, he hoped the editorial board would move in step. Bezos seemed to enjoy speaking with the section’s editor, David Shipley, about creating a forum for pragmatic ideas and policy solutions. Wonky centrist stuff.

That hands-off approach changed with the spiking of the Harris endorsement 11 days before the 2024 election—abruptly ending a half-century-long tradition and provoking 250,000 subscription cancellations. Those sympathetic to Bezos say that the last-minute timing wasn’t his fault. Lewis had told the editorial board that he would handle getting Bezos’s approval. But as the election drew closer, it clearly had not been handled—or was not handle-able. “The timing of their refusing to endorse was too close to the election,” Barry Diller told me. “If

the Post had been his only job, he would have done that much earlier."

Lewis, who stepped aside in February 2026, did not respond to requests for comment. He certainly deserves blame for some of the destruction. But the most consequential decisions were not his. It was not Lewis who withheld the endorsement. It was not Lewis who complained to Trump about the "terrible" businesspeople at the Post shortly after Trump's reelection, according to Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swan's Regime Change. It was not Lewis who dined with the president on the very day he announced that the Opinion section would focus exclusively on "personal liberties and free markets" (a decision that prompted Shipley's resignation).

Bezos has framed the changes at the Post as a matter of necessity and opportunity, writing in an op-ed that he wanted to reposition the paper for Middle America. Journalism isn't a charity, and Bezos's own politics have clearly shifted. He is, after all, the owner.



Kent Nishimura / Bloomberg / Getty

A rally outside *The Washington Post*'s headquarters in February after the company announced layoffs

But Bezos plainly appears to have made a Faustian bargain. Just as Blue Origin was getting its act together, a second Trump presidency dawned, with Bezos's chief antagonist, Elon Musk, in a position of extraordinary influence. Musk had spent $288 million to help elect Trump and other Republicans. He was a

senior adviser to the president. Amazon had fought the first Trump administration for more than a year over a cloud-computing contract. The administration had been lobbied hard by Oracle, Amazon's cloud competitor, whose co-founder had reportedly given about $45 million to a nonprofit supporting Trump's reelection. Oracle had also produced a docket of baseless conspiracies about Amazon that found its way to the president's desk.

Marty Baron was the executive editor of the Post from 2013 to 2021, a gilded era that produced 11 Pulitzer Prizes and vital reporting on Edward Snowden, the Trump Access Hollywood tape, and the Robert Mueller investigation. "Everything I saw in my years there was that he truly believed what he was saying about democracy and the press," Baron told me. "But I don't think he thinks these other businesses could survive unless he finds a way to successfully navigate through the Trump era. And if the Post is the thing that has to pay the price, then, well, that'll have to be the thing that pays the price."

Donald Trump is not a simple transactional figure. He gets what he wants, but he also warps reality in the process. Countless executives have learned that successfully dealing with him requires both capitulation and an insistence that no capitulation has occurred. If Bezos and Trump did come to an arrangement, it would make Bezos a hypocrite twice: once for breaking his promise to Post readers, and once for pretending he hadn't.

Jeff Bezos also tends to get what he wants—and unlike Trump, he's willing to wait years for it. He's comfortable with being misunderstood. Which is another way of saying that there's more than one way to look at a Faustian bargain: not in terms of what must be sacrificed, but in terms of what might one day be gained.

"NG-3, BABY!" whooped a man in a Titusville, Florida, 7-Eleven in April, shortly before flashing me his admittedly glorious NASA-logo calf tattoo. People who live along Florida's 72-mile Space Coast rarely end up there by accident. Some work in aerospace; the rest seem to wish they did. They buy condos and arrange their schedules for optimal viewing of the rockets rising from

the Kennedy Space Center. As subcultures go, they're somewhere between Deadheads and bird-watchers: obsessive, migratory, and willing to wait a very long time for the thing they came to see.

I was in town at the invitation of Blue Origin to witness the third launch of New Glenn—NG-3. This would be the first time Blue Origin reused a booster from a previous launch, a crucial step. The nonreusable upper part of NG-3 would be carrying a large telecom satellite for AST SpaceMobile.

Dave Limp was in from Washington State to watch the launch and schmooze the satellite guys. Limp is 60, and in his sensible jeans, glasses, and Blue Origin three-quarter zip, he looks like the most reasonable man in every room he enters. When he started the job, he'd wondered if a consumer-electronics guy was the right fit for a rocket company, but he'd come around to Bezos's diagnosis—that Blue Origin needed more disciplined decision making, more manufacturing expertise, and more Bezos. "Jeff can be annoying at times, but he's right a lot," Limp told me. "And he was right on this."

The standard that Limp is being held to has a name: Gwynne Shotwell. Limp is an admirer, and has arranged his duties accordingly. “My job is to have Jeff live in the future,” Limp said. “So if he has to hear about an HR issue or a financial issue or a schedule issue, I have not done my job.”

His other job is to get rockets up, fast. The Federal Communications Commission requires satellite operators such as AST to put a certain percentage of their constellations in space by specific dates, or they risk losing authorization for the satellites they failed to deploy. Amazon was supposed to deploy half of its 3,236 satellites by July 2026. The FCC granted a waiver in June after Amazon explained that it was producing satellites faster than any of its launch providers—including Blue Origin—could get them into space.

A year earlier, the New Shepard tourism rocket had carried a team of six women, including Lauren Sánchez and Katy Perry, into space. Now Limp put it on indefinite hiatus. All focus, he told me, was on the lunar lander and getting New Glenn rockets

produced with assembly-line speed: “The ‘step by step’ component of our motto—let’s fast-walk it, you know?”

At 7:25 a.m. the next morning, NG-3 lifted off from Blue Origin’s launchpad at Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. It did not blast off like the rockets of old. Accelerometers and gyroscopes fed its position to the guidance system as computers continuously adjusted thrust and steering, making millions of pounds of rocket seem almost to levitate. When the rocket disappeared, it left behind a long, knobby cloud—a strangely beautiful albino Cheeto. Six minutes later, the booster landed a few hundred miles away in the Atlantic Ocean on the drone ship Jacklyn, named for Bezos’s late mother. Everyone went nuts.

I didn’t find out for a few hours that the mission had been a dud. One of NG-3’s engines had failed to produce enough thrust and dropped AST’s satellite in the wrong orbit, too low to be useful. AST had insurance, but the customer doesn’t care if you save money by reusing your booster; it cares that you get the job done. Blue Origin had not.

At 12:12 p.m., the day got a little worse: SpaceX announced that it had just landed its Falcon 9 booster for the 600th time.

A month later, a New Glenn rocket undergoing a static-fire test caused the largest explosion in the history of Cape Canaveral, badly damaging Blue Origin's only operational launchpad and temporarily grounding the program.

ONLY TWO PEOPLE have the means and ambition to vertically integrate the galaxy, and one of them has the upper hand. In 2025, SpaceX launched 83 percent of the mass sent into orbit—about 10 times more than its nearest competitor, the Chinese government. Starlink's 11,000-plus satellites account for roughly two-thirds of all active spacecraft orbiting Earth.

Limp, at least, knows all of this. He acknowledged that SpaceX is "by far the leader." But, he said, "there's so much demand for space right now that if we get to the scale and the execution of SpaceX, the world will be a happy place. And that does not mean Gwynne and Elon have to fail."

The exact size of that demand is debatable. SpaceX and Blue Origin, along with a handful of smaller competitors, provide launch services to other companies and the federal government, but most of the demand comes from their own or affiliated satellite fleets. In finance, this is called captive demand, and it's generally regarded with suspicion. In commercial space, it's called vertical integration, and it's the whole point.

This is why the SpaceX prospectus reads like both a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission and a transcript of an investment banker's weekend on mushrooms. "Our mission," it states, "is to build the systems and technologies necessary to make life multiplanetary, to understand the true nature of the universe, and to extend the light of consciousness to the stars." It then arrives at a number for a total addressable market that includes the light of consciousness: $28.5 trillion. It must have been fun to sit in the room as that number got calculated.

Musk's mesmeric power over investors is well-known. Tesla earned just $3.8 billion in 2025 and is somehow one of the

world's dozen most valuable companies. (Caterpillar, which makes backhoes, earned approximately $8.9 billion.) It's best to read the prospectus not as a ledger but as the blueprint for a future empire: the East India Company of space.

The business is a ladder that starts with rocket-launch capability. The next rung up is satellite arrays. This is a much more profitable business—Starlink really does pay for most everything at SpaceX—but it depends on launch capability. The third rung requires a leap of engineering faith: data centers in space. The fourth is the reason to build them—control over an off-world computing economy capable of training and running AI models at a scale that's hard to achieve on Earth. In January, SpaceX filed a proposal with the FCC to operate up to 1 million data-center satellites in orbit—describing the project, in the filing itself, as the "first step towards becoming a Kardashev II–level civilization." A Kardashev Type II civilization is one capable of harnessing the entire energy output of its star.

Does this sound crazy? If so, technology's biggest players are eager to break into the asylum. Space offers AI companies

abundant solar energy available 24 hours a day, and freedom from the NIMBYism that makes earthbound data centers and power plants so contentious. “Should I make a rocket company?” OpenAI’s CEO, Sam Altman, asked on a podcast in 2025. OpenAI subsequently tried, unsuccessfully, to take over Stoke Space, a reusable-rocket start-up founded by former Blue Origin employees. Alphabet’s Google and the satellite operator Planet intend to launch two prototype satellites in early 2027 to test whether AI chips can operate effectively in orbit.

Google and OpenAI do not have their own ladders. Musk does, and he’s already climbed the first two rungs; in August, he posted that SpaceX would put its first satellite data center in orbit by the end of next year. Bezos is in between—he has a ladder; it’s just shorter and shakier. The question is how much the gap matters as the race moves upward, into new areas of engineering and imagination where no one—not even SpaceX—has a lead.

In late 2027, Blue Origin plans to deploy TeraWave, a constellation of 5,408 new satellites custom designed to provide

data centers and governments with internet up to 6,000 times faster than Amazon's satellites. New Glenn is expected to place TeraWave into orbit.

John Couluris leads Blue Origin's lunar-permanence team, charged with creating the infrastructure for colonization. "Maybe seven years ago, people wouldn't have said, 'Well, we could do data centers on the moon,'" Couluris told me. Now he considers it complicated but more and more plausible. The challenges are real—chips fail, cosmic radiation is weird, and maintenance is essentially impossible. But if launch costs continue to drop, they'll offset the expense. Couluris said Blue Origin is already working on manufacturing solar cells directly from lunar soil. The chips would come from Earth; almost everything else could be made on-site.

The destination for all of this potential computing power has only recently become clear. In 2024, I heard rumors about Prometheus, a company whose plans were inscrutable even by the standards of AI start-ups. No one associated with

Prometheus would confirm its existence. Given the history of Blue Origin, this should have been a tell.

What's now known is that Prometheus is trying to build something quite different from the generative-AI models that spit out text or code. The most complicated things that humans create—jet engines, drug molecules, semiconductors—live at the intersection of invention and engineering, where physical forces interact in ways that are expensive to model and even more expensive to test. An engineer can sketch a thousand designs; each one still has to survive contact with physics. Prometheus is intended to compress that process—to create an artificial general engineer capable not merely of proposing designs, but, it seems, of simulating, testing, refining, and, eventually, helping manufacture them. The grandest possible outcome is a machine that makes machines.

There's an echo here for Bezos. Neal Stephenson and Blue Origin's other early employees spent years exploring engineering possibilities in slow motion while the competition raced ahead. An artificial general engineer could compress all of

that painstaking discovery into rapid computation: a Neal Stephenson bot.

This could be useful to all humankind—and particularly useful to someone trying to build dexterous warehouse robots, cheaper rockets, and data centers on the moon. Whether any of this is possible, and on what timeline, is unknown. Large language models were jump-started by the availability (or theft) of trillions of words; there's less training data on the physical world. The models also have to understand multiple kinds of physics at once, account for uncertainty, and produce results trustworthy enough to bet hardware and human lives on. Those problems are very expensive to solve. At least for most people.

In November 2025, Prometheus's existence became public, along with the news that it had raised $6.2 billion, the largest chunk of which came from Bezos. He was also named co-CEO, his first operational role since Amazon. Prometheus has since hired 150 people, many from OpenAI and Google DeepMind. Dave told me that Bezos spends his days bouncing between

Prometheus and Blue Origin. “But he multitasks very well. Well, he single-tasks in a multitask world very well.”

Musk already has his own AI company, xAI, which he merged with SpaceX. His chatbot, Grok, has mostly distinguished itself through creepiness and anti-Semitism, but Musk used $60 billion in stock from the IPO to buy Cursor, an AI-coding assistant that’s one of the fastest-growing software companies. That leaves tens of billions more to spend on the most precious commodity in tech: margin for error.

It’s not a coincidence that, a few weeks after the SpaceX IPO, Blue Origin said it had secured $10 billion in outside funding, the first non-Bezos money in the company’s 26-year history. Limp called it a sign of confidence. It was also an acknowledgment of reality: Blue Origin is going to need more money. It has less margin, and more errors.



Gary Hershorn / Getty

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket passes over Lower Manhattan in August.

SpaceX is winding down Falcon 9, the workhorse rocket that's served as the West's space-transportation system, in order to concentrate on Starship (as of this writing, the company was preparing for its 14th test flight—the first to attempt orbit). Other satellite companies have reported trouble buying Falcon launches beyond 2028. Starship will offer significantly more capacity—but SpaceX may use much of that capacity itself:

Starlink and the orbital data centers it hopes to build are potentially far more lucrative than carrying other people's satellites. In other words, the company that solved America's launch shortage may now be creating another one.

This is not just a business problem. It also matters to a sovereign nation that has recently discovered that one of its citizens possesses powers normally reserved for states. All of humanity may learn what it means to have its future built atop someone else's rocket.

In 2022, Ukraine asked Musk to extend Starlink coverage over Crimea so it could carry out military operations. Musk refused. General Mark Milley, then the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and National Security Adviser Sullivan spoke with him about the decision. "And there wasn't much we could do about that, absent taking some very coercive measures," Sullivan told me—measures no one wants to take.

Three years later, during an X fight with Trump, Musk threatened to immediately decommission SpaceX's Dragon

capsule, the only American vehicle capable of transporting astronauts to and from the International Space Station. Without it, NASA would have had to pay Russia $80 million a seat on Soyuz capsules. A few hours later, Musk backed down. “We absolutely need diversification on this,” Sullivan said. “And what’s challenging is that the most likely pathway to diversification lies through another mercurial billionaire.”

THAT THE REPUBLIC finds itself needing Bezos’s extraordinary concentration of private power to mitigate Musk’s extraordinary concentration of private power is probably not what the Founders had in mind. I asked Senator Mark Kelly, a former astronaut, if he trusted either man completely. He replied, “Kind of a loaded question.”

Kelly has met Bezos. His history with Musk dates back to at least 2012, when he joined SpaceX’s human-spaceflight safety-advisory panel, consulting on the Dragon capsule that would eventually make SpaceX indispensable to NASA. After Kelly, who serves on the Armed Services and Intelligence Committees, visited Ukraine in 2025, Musk called him a “traitor” on X. So it

goes. But Kelly doesn't begrudge SpaceX its dominance. "It's not SpaceX's fault, right?" Kelly said. "They got ahead. They do it well." What he wants is for SpaceX to "continue to be a successful company because it is in our national-security interest that that's the case. I also want to see Blue Origin be successful."

The pragmatist's position, shared by most of the national-security community, is that one company capable of getting you to space is better than none, and two is better than one. But even if Bezos is the less mercurial billionaire, Blue Origin is not yet a reliable substitute for SpaceX.



Andrew Harnik / Getty

At the start of Trump's second term, Elon Musk served as a senior adviser to the president and wielded extraordinary influence.

So the government can't use Blue Origin as leverage. It can threaten to withhold contracts from SpaceX, but, as Trump discovered, Musk will respond by threatening to decommission the only American vehicle capable of reaching the space station. It can nationalize the companies, which would require a political

consensus that doesn't exist and a legal argument that hasn't been made. Kelly thinks campaign-finance reform would make it harder for the next Musk to buy his way into the center of government, or the next Bezos to buy his way back into its good graces. When I asked which is more likely to happen first—campaign-finance reform or data centers on the moon—Kelly laughed. "I hope it's campaign-finance reform."

The government is not negotiating from a position of strength, but Bezos and Musk have a shared vulnerability: Both say they would like to go to the moon—for their empires, for glory, and because their youthful love of space has never settled into something more rational. To put it in terms they and the president would all understand, the moon is leverage. If the people trying to bargain with Charles Foster Kane had known about Rosebud, they would have dangled a sled.

For all of the stated urgency of the 2016 Trump transition meeting, what's really happening with America's return to the moon is only just now coming into view. In February, Musk posted on X that SpaceX had shifted focus from Mars to building

a “self-growing city on the Moon.” The SpaceX prospectus has a section called “Establish the lunar economy,” which includes a base supplied by a continuous flow of people and cargo, eventually capable of producing its own water, fuel, power, and manufactured goods. Moontown sounds great, but the engineering details are a kind of truth serum—revealing the distance between what Bezos and Musk say they want and where their priorities actually lie.

SpaceX’s Starship cannot get to the moon without stopping for gas. The plan it sold NASA works roughly like this: SpaceX launches a Starship to serve as a fuel depot; then it launches a succession of tanker Starships to fill the depot; then it launches the lunar lander, which gasses up at the depot and departs for the moon. NASA’s Office of Inspector General estimates that at least 15 Starship launches will be needed to deliver all the fuel. No spacecraft has ever transferred ultracold methane and oxygen between vehicles in orbit.

In August, SpaceX committed $100 billion to build what Musk called “the biggest launch site on Earth” in Louisiana. This, along

with its other facilities, should allow it, eventually, to launch multiple rockets a day. But even if SpaceX can get refueler rockets to the depot before the other rockets run out of gas, Doug Loverro, NASA's former associate administrator for human exploration and operations, told me he's skeptical of all the other things Starship has to prove: that it can reach orbit, keep astronauts alive, transfer fuel repeatedly in space, fly to the moon, land, and—crucially, if you're an astronaut—take off again. His point is not that any single step is impossible. It's the sheer number of steps that have to work in sequence. "Hurdle No. 1 is let's get Starship to orbit," Loverro said. "Which still hasn't happened yet."

Blue Origin's route to the moon is complicated too: New Glenn first sends a transporter into low Earth orbit to be refueled. The lander, Blue Moon, launches separately, takes on fuel, and heads toward the moon, while the transporter climbs to a higher orbit for another fill. Near the moon, the two dock for one final transfer. Only then do the astronauts arrive and move

into Blue Moon, which they use to descend to the surface and return to their spacecraft.

It’s an elaborate chain of rendezvous and refuelings, but the jobs are divided among purpose-built vehicles: New Glenn launches, the transporter carries fuel across deep space, and Blue Moon lands. SpaceX assigns nearly all of those jobs to variants of the same enormous Starship.



Saul loeb / AFP / Getty

Jeff Bezos unveils Blue Moon, a lunar lander, in Washington, D.C., in 2019.

Also, as NASA's Office of Inspector General has pointed out, Starship's lander is 171 feet tall—roughly the equivalent of a 14-story building—and its astronauts descend in an elevator that begins 115 feet up. There's no other way back into the vehicle if the elevator fails. Blue Moon is 52 feet, and its crew walks down a set of stairs that starts six feet off the ground.

If you're curious why, 60 years after Apollo, getting to the moon seems harder, part of the answer is that NASA has 60 years of pent-up expectations. The original astronauts flew in tin cans atop disposable rockets. A sustained presence on the moon will require more mass and more propellant.

Most people I spoke with have reached the same conclusion: On this, Blue Origin is ahead. It has completed thermal-vacuum testing on Blue Moon, and, as of August, its structure, propulsion, and avionics were fully assembled; it's already communicating with NASA's satellites and deep-space network.

Even with the launchpad explosion, Blue Origin still plans to deliver an uncrewed test mission to the moon by early next year. That first flight will be a chance to work out many of Blue Origin's hardest lunar-specific tasks on a single trip.

The crux of the difference is that Blue Origin—the smaller, slower company in need of a win—seems to have built a product to fit the brief, while Musk has built a giant rocket designed for his satellite business and his personal goal of deep-space travel to Mars. Making Starship work for the moon is like adapting a cargo ship to win a yacht race.

None of this guarantees that Blue Origin gets to the moon first. "I'm the first to say never count Elon out," Loverro told me. "He's a clever guy." It also doesn't really solve the mercurial-billionaire problem as much as shift it. But Loverro had a suggestion so simple and clever that it made me laugh out loud.

The Apollo missions also sprang from private industry, but NASA divided the work among contractors—Boeing, North American Aviation, IBM, and more. Different companies, different roles,

forced into collaboration by NASA. Why not make Starship the refueling station for Blue Moon? SpaceX would have to reconfigure some of its designs, but “it only takes one Starship to fill up a Blue lander. It may take 10 or 15 Starships to fill up a Starship lander. If they work together, they could both get there sooner.

“We’re individualistic in the United States,” Loverro continued. “Every man for themselves. But that’s not how we do great things. We do great things because we find the best of everything that we can bring to the table, and then we do it together. That’s what NASA’s job truly is—to organize that team. And they’re failing to do so.”

The person responsible for organizing that team is NASA’s administrator, Jared Isaacman, a self-made billionaire who twice flew to space on SpaceX’s Dragon capsule and performed the first private spacewalk. His relationship with Musk complicated his confirmation. On his first day in the job, Isaacman said that whichever lander was ready first would get the mission. He declined an interview request for this story.

Isaacman may hold to his winner-take-all position. He may avoid angering two of America's most powerful men and hope their engineering successes or failures make the decision for him. But the Solomonic solution has a certain appeal: Force Musk and Bezos to work together, and test their willingness to share a win.

One small step toward reminding them that the nation is still king.

This article appears in the November 2026 print edition with the headline "Choose Your Overlord." When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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Josh Tyrangiel is a staff writer at The Atlantic. He was previously the editor of Bloomberg Businessweek and chief content officer for Bloomberg Media.