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Elon Musk Got What He Paid For

After spending nearly \$300 million to support Trump's election, Elon Musk announced his departure from his role as a 'special government adviser' to the White House. Under law, Musk's term was set to expire after 130 days – a mark that he reached on May 30. While Musk's Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) project did not come close to reaching its stated cost-cutting goals, there is no doubt that his formal White House stint was extremely beneficial to Musk's business interests.

Musk launched DOGE with a goal of cutting \$1 trillion from the federal budget (he once even doubled that goal). Even by their own deeply flawed calculations, DOGE came nowhere near this target. What DOGE actually 'saved' is hard to determine, given their widely documented problems with accuracy (at one point DOGE was claiming \$55 billion in savings; one NPR analysis could only document about \$2 billion). There's a strong case that in the end it will cost more than it saved – massive cuts at the IRS will shave billions in tax revenue, jobs losses at national parks will impact tourism, and the legal costs to defend DOGE's actions will be considerable.

There is no doubt that DOGE has done considerable damage, both inside and outside the federal government. Tens of thousands of federal workers have been fired, and many others have quit before facing what seemed like an inevitable termination. The impact on US foreign aid has been especially striking, and remarkably deadly – one tracker estimates that hundreds of thousands have already died due to the drastic cuts to global health programs. A study published in the Lancet estimates that cuts to PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) will lead to tens of thousands of additional deaths in sub-Saharan Africa.

Musk's Profiteering

But being essentially the co-president —even for a short time— has been a boon to Musk's business interests. From the start, Musk's efforts to curtail the power of various regulatory agencies had a direct impact on his business empire. A report from Senate Democrats found that Musk's companies “were subject to at least 65 actual or potential actions by 11 different federal agencies” – investigations that range from fines for labor and workplace safety violations to potential liabilities linked to false or misleading statements about Tesla. The letter points to hundreds of consumer complaints about Tesla to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) – an agency Musk vowed to “delete.”

Beyond striking out against government watchdogs, some of the more outright examples of corruption were carried out in the open. As we noted in March, the Commerce Department changed the terms of a Biden-era broadband program to include Musk's Starlink satellite system – a change that was estimated to deliver at least an additional \$6 billion to the company, and as much as \$16 billion.

Boosting Starlink was apparently part of the US trade and foreign policy agenda as well. The Washington Post reported that the State Department has “pushed nations to clear hurdles for US satellite companies, often mentioning Starlink by name.” These discussions, the paper notes, have often come during discussions about reducing Trump tariffs – the implication being that making deals that benefit Musk's company will create goodwill with the White House. The paper added that “Starlink's international expansion could unlock multibillion-dollar revenue streams.”

Prior to his formal departure, Musk expressed disappointment with Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill for not doing enough to cut government spending. But at least one area of spending could deliver substantial benefits to Musk: the administration's “Golden Dome” missile defense system. Critics of the project argue that it is likely to be an expensive and ineffective boondoggle – it could cost \$25 billion up front, and hundreds of billions down the line. All of that spending could be very helpful to Musk; according to a Reuters report, Musk has teamed up with a drone manufacturer and the software company Palantir (co-founded by Trump ally Peter Thiel) to put together a bid on a contract to build key parts of the system. The companies have been meeting with Pentagon officials and other members of the Trump administration – a process that prompted a letter from House Democrats to the Inspector General at the Defense Department, requesting a review of the situation.

It's quite likely that other Musk-linked scandals will continue to surface. Another Reuters exclusive, for example, described how some government agencies have adopted

Musk's AI chatbot Grok to analyze massive amounts of government data. This raises serious questions about data security and privacy, but also points to larger issues over future AI contracting with the federal government. Put simply, Grok would appear to have a major advantage over their competitors – not to mention access to an unknown amount of government information.

At a recent business conference, Musk mused about his future involvement in politics: “In terms of political spending, I’m going to do a lot less in the future... I think I’ve done enough.” This may or may not be true. But what’s certain is that Musk’s considerable investment in electing Donald Trump has, in many ways, paid off.

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