

TECH NEWS

Elon Musk and DOGE are hacking the government

Musk has moved with lightning speed to try to remake the federal government. Many Democrats and even some Republicans say his efforts are unlawful.



— Elon Musk is following the same playbook he used when he took over Twitter, now X.

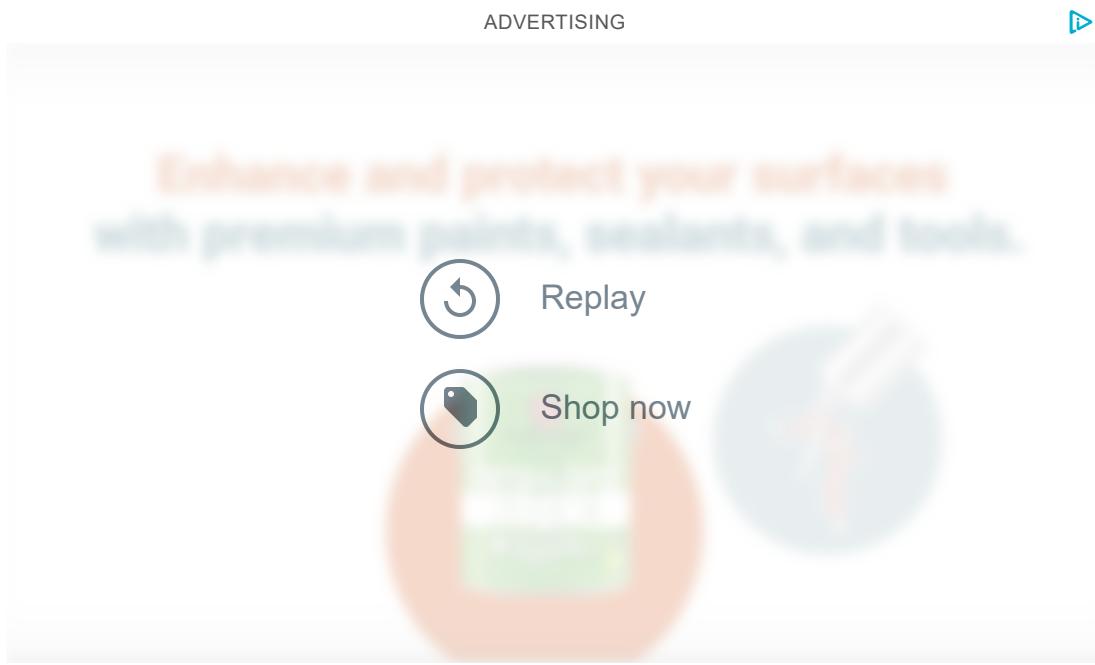
Justine Goode / NBC News; Getty Images

Feb. 4, 2025, 5:00 AM EST

By David Ingram

In the shorthand of the tech industry, Elon Musk has hacked into the government.

The billionaire tech magnate has never been elected to office or been confirmed by the Senate for a high-level government job, but in the span of a few days, Musk has still gained access to sensitive federal data through his position as head of President Donald Trump's [Department of Government Efficiency](#) project, or DOGE, to push a far-reaching agenda and potentially spark a constitutional crisis.



Musk has embraced Silicon Valley's most notorious instincts to "move fast and break things" in a lightning battle to muscle into the computer systems and power structures of federal agencies. As he did with his [corporate takeover of Twitter](#) in 2022, he has brought in a team to assess details such as office building leases, budget line items, vendor contracts and the performance of individual employees – with the stated intention of radically downsizing the organization.

With a cadre of engineers as young as 19 years old, and with the encouragement of Trump, Musk has demanded and been given access to [sensitive government databases](#) and the [Treasury Department's payment system](#) with an unprecedented series of bureaucratic maneuvers.

There are deep concerns among many Democrats and some Republicans that Musk – and his staff members who are not government workers and are not bound by the same ethics and rules that apply to federal workers – are acting in secret, without accountability and potentially against the law in the Trump administration's effort to shrink the federal government.

Wired executive director discusses young engineers leading Musk's DOGE project

04:17



DOGE is an office within the Executive Office of the President, according to a Trump [executive order from Jan. 20](#), and Musk has been named a “[special government employee](#),” according to a White House official. It is a temporary position that allows him greater access, but it also bypasses some of the disclosure obligations required of full-time government employees.

DOGE’s targets include the U.S. Agency for International Development, which closed its headquarters Monday in anticipation of [shutting down entirely](#). Musk’s DOGE has staff members working at the Treasury Department, which pays the government’s bills, and he has said on X that he wants to slash or overhaul several other agencies, including the [General Services Administration](#), the [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#) and the [Education Department](#).

A person who has been affiliated with Musk’s SpaceX is working as [an adviser to the FBI director](#), NBC News has reported. The White House Office of Personnel Management has [offered federal employees](#) the option of taking “deferred resignations,” or buyouts, in an [echo of Musk’s Twitter breakup](#).

USAID's future uncertain as Elon Musk targets its budget

02:43



Inside the offices of USAID, more than 1,000 staff members and contractors have been fired or furloughed because of a near-total freeze on foreign assistance, and the agency's security leaders were [put on administrative leave](#) Saturday after they tried to prevent DOGE employees from accessing secure systems, NBC News has reported. At least some of the DOGE employees had [insufficient security clearances](#), sources have said.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Musk was operating a “shadow government” that put all government services at risk.

“If DOGE attacks USAID today, then you can be sure they’ll move on to another target tomorrow. Who knows, maybe it’ll be the Postal Service or the IRS or even the Social Security Administration?” he said.

Musk did not respond to an email request Monday for an interview.

It was not clear what Musk and his DOGE team planned to do with their access to sensitive data, such as Treasury records of all payments made by the government, but in social media posts, Musk has openly mused about [cutting federal jobs](#), canceling contracts, stopping payments or selectively releasing records to illustrate his points about alleged waste. It is a playbook he has already used; he selectively released [internal Twitter documents](#) after he bought the company, arguing that the previous management had been politically biased.

Many Democrats – and even some Republicans – say the attempted unilateral remake of the federal government is unlawful, as Trump and Musk have shoved aside not only career civil servants but also the authority of Congress itself.

“It’s a potential constitutional crisis,” said Brian Riedl, a former Senate Republican staff member who is now a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute. In a phone interview, he said he was concerned that Musk’s power is going unchecked.

“Someone with as much power as Elon Musk has should be Senate-confirmed,” he said. “There needs to be some accountability to Congress and the voters.”

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., vice chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said Musk was breaking the law.

“An unelected, unaccountable billionaire with expansive conflicts of interest, deep ties to China and an indiscreet ax to grind against perceived enemies is hijacking our nation’s most sensitive financial data systems and its checkbook so that he can illegally block funds to our constituents based on the slightest whim or wildest conspiracy,” she said at a news conference Monday at the Capitol.

Musk has been using as his primary example of suspected government waste a dubious claim that \$50 million of taxpayer money went to pay for condoms sent to the Gaza Strip. The Associated Press reported last week that [there was no evidence for the claim](#).

And he has acted largely in secret, withholding not only the names of newly hired government officials who are helping him make decisions, but also the details of the decisions themselves and the supposed legal authority under which he is operating. On Monday, after people began posting the names of DOGE employees online, Musk accused them of breaking the law.

Edward Martin, the Trump-appointed interim U.S. attorney for Washington, D.C., said in a [statement on X](#) late Monday that he was prepared to prosecute people who were “targeting DOGE employees.”

“Our initial review of the evidence presented to us indicates that certain individuals and/or groups have committed acts that appear to violate the law in targeting DOGE employees,” he said, adding, “We also have our prosecutors preparing.” Earlier Monday, Martin [wrote a public letter to Musk](#) vowing to “pursue any and all legal action against anyone who impedes your work or threatens your people.”

Musk's posts on social media indicate he is working unconventional, long hours, and he said he worked through the weekend. He has told multiple people that he is sleeping at DOGE's offices, [Wired reported last week](#).

The acronym for Musk's project, DOGE, is a joking reference to a [volatile digital currency](#), and DOGE is not an official department created by Congress, but by any measure Musk has more influence with Trump than most Cabinet members.

Musk, the wealthiest person in the world, appeared to be taken aback early Monday at how easily he had grabbed influence in Washington.

"Although it is a humorous name, ironically I think DOGE will have a very serious and significant impact on government waste and fraud and abuse – which is really astonishing," he said in an audio-only event on X.

Trump pledged Monday that the White House would closely oversee Musk's activity.

"Elon can't do and won't do anything without our approval, and we'll give him the approval where appropriate. Where not appropriate, we won't," he told reporters Monday in the Oval Office.

But the questions hanging over DOGE are extraordinary, especially as they relate to the Constitution: Members of Congress are in charge of writing spending bills and control the nation's checkbook. Cabinet leaders and department heads are subject to confirmation by the Senate.

Trump, asked Monday about potential financial conflicts of interest for Musk, said: "Where we think there's a conflict or a problem, we won't let him go near it."

As a "[special government employee](#)" in the Trump administration, Musk must abide by ethics and conflict-of-interest policies that are generally less onerous than they are for full-time government staff members. He still has full-time jobs as the CEO of two major corporations, Tesla and SpaceX, and he is the owner of various other tech companies, including X, xAI and Neuralink.

The Trump administration has not published a list of DOGE employees or even made it clear how many of them are full-time employees, as opposed to outside advisers or volunteers. On Sunday, *Wired* published the names of six young men, ages 19 to 24, who it said were working for DOGE.

One of the DOGE staffers, Gavin Kliger, was the person who sent an email early Monday informing all USAID employees that the headquarters would be closed to most of them, according to a copy of the email seen by NBC News. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2020, according to his LinkedIn profile. He did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday.

Musk has boasted about his staff, calling them some of the “world’s best software engineers” and comparing them to warriors from ancient Greece.

“Not many Spartans are needed to win battles,” he [posted Sunday on X](#).

DOGE is not being transparent about other aspects of its work, including how many job cuts it may have recommended or prompted and any halts to congressionally approved spending that it may have suggested. Even measuring the impact of DOGE may be difficult because it is not clear how people outside the government could validate some of the metrics Musk is citing, such as the value of cuts. (Last week, Musk said DOGE was cutting the deficit by [about \\$1 billion a day](#), without providing details, and then said he was “[cautiously optimistic](#)” about getting to \$4 billion a day.)

On Monday, Musk said on X that a small office within the government focused on technology, known as 18F, “has been deleted,” without providing any additional details. The 18F office, launched during the Obama administration, said last year it had [completed 455 digital projects](#), including modernizing the U.S. Forest Service’s online permit process and helping create the popular [Direct File project](#) for free tax-filing.

Over the weekend, Musk called government workers “[the opposing team](#)” and taunted them for not working over the weekend. 

— David Ingram

David Ingram is a tech reporter for NBC News.

— Kevin Collier, Katherine Doyle, Brandy Zadrozny, Erik Ortiz and Vaughn Hillyard contributed.
