

There's a Term for What Trump and Musk Are Doing

How regime change happens in America

By February 13, 2025



Illustration by Ben Hickey

Produced by ElevenLabs and [News Over Audio \(Noa\)](#) using AI narration. Listen to more stories on the Noa app.

Updated at 1:01 p.m. ET on February 14, 2025

Despite its name, the Department of Government Efficiency is not, so far, primarily interested in efficiency. DOGE and its boss, Elon Musk, have instead focused their activity on the

eradication of the federal civil service, along with its culture and values, and its replacement with something different. In other words: regime change.

No one should be surprised or insulted by this phrase, because this is exactly what Trump and many who support him have long desired. During his 2024 campaign, Trump [spoke of Election Day](#) as “Liberation Day,” a moment when, in his words, “[vermin](#)” and “[radical left lunatics](#)” would be eliminated from public life. J. D. Vance [has said](#) that Trump should “fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people.” Steve Bannon [prefers to talk](#) about the “deconstruction of the administrative state,” but that amounts to the same thing.

These ideas are not original to Vance or Bannon: In the 21st century, elected leaders such as Hugo Chávez or Viktor Orbán have also used their democratic mandates for the same purpose. Chávez [fired 19,000 employees](#) of the state oil company; Orbán [dismantled labor protections](#) for the civil service. Trump, Musk, and Russell Vought, the newly appointed director of the Office of Management and Budget and architect of the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025—the original regime-change blueprint—are now using IT operations, captured payments systems, secretive engineers, a blizzard of executive orders, and viral

propaganda to achieve the same thing.

This appears to be DOGE's true purpose. Although Trump and Musk insist they are fighting fraud, they have [not yet provided evidence for their sweeping claims](#). Although they demand transparency, Musk conceals his own [conflicts of interest](#). Although they do say they want efficiency, Musk has made no attempt to professionally audit or even understand many of the programs being cut. Although they say they want to cut costs, the programs they are attacking represent a tiny fraction of the U.S. budget. The only thing these policies will certainly do, and are clearly designed to do, is alter the behavior and values of the civil service. Suddenly, and not accidentally, people who work for the American federal government are having the same experience as people who find themselves living under foreign occupation.

[Theodore Roosevelt: An object lesson in civil-service reform](#)

The destruction of the modern civil-service ethos will take time. It dates from the late 19th century, when Theodore Roosevelt and other civil-service reformers launched a crusade to eliminate the spoils system that dominated government service. At that time, whoever won the presidency always got to fire everyone and appoint his own people, even for menial jobs. Much of the world still relies on such patronage systems, and they are both corrupt and

corrupting. Politicians hand out job appointments in exchange for bribes. They appoint unqualified people—somebody's cousin, somebody's neighbor, or just a party hack—to jobs that require knowledge and experience. Patronage creates bad government and bad services, because it means government employees serve a patron, not a country or its constitution. When that patron demands, say, a tax break for a businessman favored by the leader or the party, they naturally comply.

Until January 20, American civil servants worked according to a different moral code. Federal workers were under instructions to respect the rule of law, venerate the Constitution, maintain political neutrality, and uphold lawful policy changes whether they come from Republican or Democratic administrations. They were supposed to measure objective reality—evidence of pollution, for example—and respond accordingly. Not all of them were good administrators or moral people, but the damage that any one of them could do was limited by audits, rules about transparency, and again, an ethos built around the rule of law. This system was accepted by everyone—Republican-voting FBI agents, Democratic-voting environmental officers, the nurses at veterans' hospitals, the air-traffic controllers at LAX.

What precisely replaces the civil-service ethos remains

unclear. Christian nationalists want [a religious state to replace our secular one](#). Tech authoritarians want a [dictatorship of engineers](#), led by a monarchical CEO. Musk and Trump might prefer an oligarchy that serves their business interests. Already, DOGE has attacked [at least 11 federal agencies](#) that were embroiled in regulatory fights with Musk's companies or were investigating them for potential violations of laws on workplace safety, workers' rights, and consumer protection.

The new system, whatever its ideology, will in practice represent a return to patronage, about which more in a minute. But before it can be imposed, the administration will first have to break the morale of the people who believed in the old civil-service ethos. Vought, at a 2023 planning meeting organized in preparation for this moment, promised exactly that. People who had previously viewed themselves as patriots, working for less money than they could make in the private sector, must be forced to understand that they are evil, enemies of the state. His statement has been cited before, but it cannot be quoted enough times: "We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected," he [said](#) at the time. "When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains ... We want to put them in trauma."

[Renée DiResta: My encounter with the fantasy-industrial](#)

The email Musk sent to most employees in the federal government, offering them a “buyout”—several months’ pay, in exchange for a commitment to resign—was intended to inflict this kind of trauma. In effect, Musk was telling federal workers that he was not interested in what they were doing, or whether they were good at it, or how they could become more efficient. Instead, he was sending the message: *You are all expendable.*

Simultaneously, Musk launched an administrative and rhetorical attack on USAID, adding cruelty to the hostility. Many USAID employees work in difficult places, risking terrorism and violence, to distribute food and medicine to the poorest people on the planet. Overnight, they were told to abandon their projects and come home. In some places, the abrupt end of their programs, for example those providing special meals to malnourished children, will result in deaths, and USAID employees know it.

The administration has not acknowledged the dramatic real-world impact of this cut, which will, if not quashed by the courts, result in relatively minor budgetary savings. On the contrary, Musk and others turned to X to lie about USAID and its alleged waste. USAID [did not give millions of dollars in direct grants](#) to *Politico*, [did not fund the visits of celebrities](#) to Ukraine, [did not send \\$50 million worth of](#)

[condoms](#) to Gaza, and [did not pay \\$84 million to Chelsea Clinton](#). But these fictions and others have now been blasted to hundreds of millions of people. Information taken from grant databases is also being selectively circulated, in some cases fed to internet trolls who are now hounding grant recipients, in order to smear people and organizations that had legitimate, congressionally approved goals. Musk and others used a similar approach during the so-called Twitter Files scandal to discredit researchers and mischaracterize their work.

But the true significance of USAID's destruction is the precedent it sets. Every employee of every U.S. department or agency now knows that the same playbook can be applied to them too: abrupt funding cuts and management changes, followed by smear campaigns. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which safeguards bank customers against unfair, deceptive, or predatory practices, is already suspended. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Education, which mostly manages student loans, may follow. Within other agencies, anyone who was involved in hiring, training, or improving workplaces for minority groups or women is at risk, as is anyone involved in mitigating climate change, in line with Trump's executive orders.

In addition, Musk has personally taken it upon himself to

destroy organizations built over decades to promote democracy and oppose Russian, Iranian, and Chinese influence around the world. For example, he [described](#) the journalists of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, who take extraordinary risks to report in Russia, Belarus, and in autocracies across Eurasia, as “radical left crazy people.” Not long after he posted this misleading screed on X, one RFE/RL journalist was [released from a Belarusian prison](#) after nearly three years in jail, as a part of the most recent prisoner exchange.

Putting them all together, the actions of Musk and DOGE have created moral dilemmas of a kind no American government employee has faced in recent history. [Protest or collaborate?](#) Speak up against lawbreaking or remain silent? A small number of people will choose heroism. In late January, a career civil servant, Nick Gottlieb, refused to obey an order to place several dozen [senior USAID employees](#) on administrative leave, on the grounds that the order violated the law. “The materials show no evidence that you engaged in misconduct,” he told them in an email. He also acknowledged that he, too, might soon be removed, as indeed he was. “I wish you all the best—you do not deserve this,” he concluded.

[Robert P. Beschel Jr.: Making government efficient again](#)

Others will decide to cooperate with the new regime—

collaborating, in effect, with an illegal assault, but out of patriotism. Much like the Ukrainian scientists who have kept the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant going under Russian occupation because they fear catastrophe if they leave, some tech experts who work on America's payment systems and databases have stayed in place even as Musk's team of very young, very inexperienced engineers has demanded illegitimate access. "Going into these systems without an in-depth understanding of how they work both individually and interconnectedly is a recipe for disaster that will result in death and economic harm to our nation," one government employee [told my Atlantic colleagues Charlie Warzel and Ian Bogost](#).

Eventually, though, if the assault on the civil service is not blocked, the heroes and the patriots will disappear. They will be fired, or denied access to the tools they need to work, or frightened by the smear campaigns. They will be replaced by people who can pass the purity tests now required to get government jobs. Some will seem silly—are you willing to say "Gulf of America" instead of "Gulf of Mexico"?—and some will be deadly serious. Already, the [Post reports](#), candidates for national-security posts in the new administration are being asked whether they accept Trump's false claim to have won the 2020 election. At least two candidates for higher positions at the FBI were also asked to state who the "real patriots" were on January 6, 2021. This particular purity test

is significant because it measures not just loyalty to Trump, but also whether federal employees are willing to repeat outright falsehoods—whether they are willing, in other words, to break the old civil-service ethos, which required people to make decisions based on objective realities, not myths or fictions.

To show that they are part of the new system, many loyalists will also engage in loud, performative behavior, designed to attract the attention and approval of Trump, Musk, Vought, or their followers. Ed Martin, the Trump-appointed interim U.S. attorney for Washington, D.C., wrote a missive addressed to “Steve and Elon” (referring to Musk and his associate Steve Davis) in which he vowed to track down “individuals and networks who appear to be stealing government property and/or threatening government employees.” If anyone is deemed to have broken the law “or acted simply unethically,” Martin theatrically promised to “chase them to the end of the Earth.” Ostentatious announcements of bans on supposed DEI or climate-change projects will similarly threaten civil servants. Late last month, the Air Force removed videos about the Tuskegee Airmen and the Women’s Airforce Service Pilots, the first Black and female Air Force pilots, from a training course. After an uproar, the videos were [put back](#), but the initial instinct was revealing. Like the people asking FBI candidates to lie about what happened on January 6, someone at the Air Force felt

obliged to deny older historical truths as well.

Eventually, demonstrations of loyalty might need to become more direct. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama [points out](#) that a future IRS head, for example, might be pressured to audit some of the president's perceived enemies. If inflation returns, government employees might feel they need to disguise this too. In the new system, they would hold their job solely at the pleasure of the president, not on behalf of the American people, so maybe it won't be in their interest to give him any bad news.

Many older civil servants will remain in the system, of course, but the new regime will suspect them of disloyalty. Already, the Office of Personnel Management has [instructed](#) federal employees to report on colleagues who are trying to "disguise" DEI programs, and threatened "adverse consequences" for anyone who failed to do so. The Defense Health Agency sent out a similar memo. NASA, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and the FBI have also told employees who are aware of "coded or imprecise language" being used to "disguise" DEI to report these violations within 10 days.

Because these memos are themselves coded and imprecise, some federal employees will certainly be tempted to abuse them. Don't like your old boss? Report him or her for "disguising DEI." Want to win some brownie points with the

new boss? Send in damning evidence about your colleagues' private conversations. In some government departments, minority employees have set up affinity groups, purely voluntary forums for conversation or social events. A number of government agencies are shutting these down; others are [being disbanded](#) by organizers who fear that membership lists will be used to target people. Even private meetings, outside the office, might not be safe from spying or snooping colleagues.

[Annie Lowrey: Civil servants are not America's enemies](#)

That might sound implausible or incredible, but at the state level, [legislation encouraging Americans to inform on other Americans](#) has proliferated. A Texas law, known as the Heartbeat Act, allows [private citizens to sue](#) anyone they believe to have helped "aid or abet" an abortion. The Mississippi legislature recently debated a proposal to pay bounties to people who identify illegal aliens for deportation. These measures are precedents for what's happening now to federal employees.

And the fate of federal employees will, in turn, serve as a precedent for what will happen to other institutions, starting with universities. Random funding cuts have already shocked some of the biggest research universities across the country, damaging ongoing projects without regard to "efficiency" or any other criteria. Political pressure will follow. Already,

zealous new employees at the National Science Foundation are [combing through descriptions](#) of existing research projects, looking to see if they violate executive orders banning DEI. Words such as *advocacy*, *disability*, *trauma*, *socioeconomic*, and yes, *women* will all trigger reviews.

There are still greater dangers down the road—the possible politicization of the Federal Election Commission, for example. Eventually, anyone who interacts with the federal government—private companies, philanthropies, churches, and above all, citizens—might find that the cultural revolution affects them too. If the federal government is no longer run by civil servants fulfilling laws passed by Congress, then its interests might seriously diverge from yours.

None of this is inevitable. Much of it will be unpopular. The old idea that public servants should serve all Americans, and not just a small elite, has been part of American culture for more than a century. Rule of law matters to many of our elected politicians, as well as to their voters, all across the political spectrum. There is still time to block this regime change, to preserve the old values. But first we need to be clear about what is happening, and why.