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Young Aides Emerge as Enforcers in Musk's Broadside Against Government

Much of the billionaire's handiwork — gaining access to internal systems and asking employees to justify their jobs — is being driven by a group of engineers operating in secrecy.



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By Theodore Schleifer, Nicholas Nehamas, Kate Conger and Ryan Mac

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At the end of his third week bulldozing through the federal government, Elon Musk sat down to give Vice President JD Vance a 90-minute briefing on his efforts to dismantle the bureaucracy. Mr. Musk was not alone.

Invited to join him on Thursday morning in Mr. Vance's stately ceremonial office suite in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, next to the White House, were a clutch of young aides whose presence at federal agencies has served as a harbinger of the upheaval that would follow them.

Across the federal government, civil servants have witnessed the sudden intrusion in the last two weeks of these young members of the billionaire's team, labeled the Department of Government Efficiency. As Mr. Musk traipses through

Washington, bent on disruption, these aides have emerged as his enforcers, sweeping into agency headquarters with black backpacks and ambitious marching orders.

While Mr. Musk is flanked by some seasoned operatives, his dizzying blitz on the federal bureaucracy is, in practice, largely being carried out by a group of male engineers, including some recent college graduates and at least one as young as 19.

Unlike their 20-something peers in Washington, who are accustomed to doing the unglamorous work ordered up by senior officials, these aides have been empowered to break the system.

Of the roughly 40 people on the team, just under half of them have some previous ties to the billionaire — but many have little government experience, The New York Times found. This account of their background and activities is based on public records, internal government databases and more than 20 people familiar with their roles, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of retaliation.

Some on the Musk team are former interns at his companies. Others are executives who have served in his employ for as long as two decades. They all appear to have channeled his shoot-first, aim-later approach to reform as they have overwhelmed the bureaucracy.

A 23-year-old who once used artificial intelligence to decode the word “purple” on an Ancient Greek scroll has swiftly gained entree to at least five federal agencies, including the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, where he has been seeking access to sensitive databases. He was part of a group that helped effectively shutter the United States Agency for International

Development, joined by the 19-year-old, a onetime Northeastern student who was fired from a data security firm after an investigation into the leaking of internal information, as Bloomberg first reported.



The United States Agency for International Development is one of several federal agencies that young representatives of Mr. Musk's team have been tasked to root out what he perceives as wasteful spending and left-wing ideology. Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

In the past week, his aides have descended upon the Education, Energy, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Transportation and Veterans Affairs Departments, along with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, according to people familiar with their activities.

Mr. Musk has praised his team as talented and relentless, defending its work as crucial to rooting out what he perceives as wasteful spending and left-wing ideology in the federal government.

“Time to confess,” he wrote on X this week. “Media reports saying that @DOGE has some of world’s best software engineers are in fact true.”

Mr. Musk did not respond to a request for comment.

On Friday, Mr. Trump told reporters that he was “very proud of the job that this group of young people, generally young people, but very smart people, they’re doing.

“They’re doing it at my insistence,” he added. “It would be a lot easier not to do it, but we have to take some of these things apart to find the corruption.”

Even as Mr. Musk’s team members upend the government, their identities have been closely held, emerging only piecemeal when the new arrivals press career officials for information and access to agency systems.

The opacity with which they are operating is highly unusual for those working in government. Aside from those conducting classified or intelligence work, the names of public employees are not generally kept secret.


Harrison Fields, a White House spokesman, said the cost-cutting team has gone through the same vetting as other federal employees, but declined to say what the vetting consisted of or whether Mr. Musk’s aides have security clearances.

The Times identified members of Mr. Musk’s initiative through internal emails identifying their roles and interviews with employees across the government who have interacted with them. None of the Musk aides responded to requests for comment.

The secrecy, Musk allies have said, is necessary so the team members do not become targets.

Several of Mr. Musk's aides have resisted being listed in government databases out of fear of their names leaking out, according to people familiar with the situation. Others have worked to remove information about themselves from the internet, scrubbing résumés and social media accounts.

When their names have been made public by news organizations such as Wired, they have been scrutinized by online sleuths. Mr. Musk has asserted, falsely, that the exposure of their roles is a "crime," and X has removed some posts and issued suspensions to those who publicize their identities.

One Musk aide whose name surfaced, Marko Elez, a 25-year-old former employee of X, resigned on Thursday, according to a White House official, after The Wall Street Journal revealed that he had made racist posts on X, writing in one message that "you could not pay me to marry outside of my ethnicity." Mr. Elez, a former employee at both X and xAI, Mr. Musk's artificial intelligence company, was one of two staff members affiliated with Mr. Musk's team who had gained access to the Treasury Department's closely held payment system. 

Mr. Elez was among those who had been invited to attend Mr. Musk's meeting with the vice president before he resigned, according to documents seen by The Times. On Friday, Mr. Musk called for The Journal reporter to be fired and said he was reinstating Mr. Elez, a move that both the president and the vice president said they supported. "We shouldn't reward journalists who try to destroy people," Mr. Vance posted on X.

A spokesman for Mr. Vance declined to comment.

Some of Mr. Musk's top advisers are more seasoned. Senior players include Brad Smith, a health care entrepreneur and an official during President Trump's first term; Amy Gleason, a former U.S. Digital Service official who has been helping at the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services; and Chris Young, a top Republican field operative whom Mr. Musk hired as a political adviser last year. Others bring extensive private sector backgrounds, including from firms like McKinsey and Morgan Stanley.

Brad Smith, left, was a health care official during President Trump's first term and now is counted among the top advisers to Mr. Musk. Doug Mills/The New York Times

But Washington is a town where much is run by twentysomethings. And much of Mr. Musk's handiwork — gutting federal websites, demanding access to internal systems, sending late-night all-staff emails and asking veteran employees to

justify their jobs — is being executed by young aides, some of them pulling all-nighters as they burrow into agencies.

Last week, young representatives of Mr. Musk's team with backpacks stuffed with a half-dozen laptops and phones arrived at the headquarters of U.S.A.I.D., demanding access to financial and personnel records. On Friday, a dozen stayed into the night, powered by a bulk order of coffee. The next day, the agency's website went dark.

At the Education Department alone, as many as 16 team members are listed in an employee directory, including Jehn Balajadia, who has effectively served as Mr. Musk's assistant for years.

Jehn Balajadia, who has long worked for Mr. Musk, is now listed in the Education Department's employee directory.

Patrick T. Fallon/Bloomberg

At the Office of Personnel Management, the nerve center of the federal government's human resources operation, a small group of coders on Mr. Musk's team sometimes sleep in the building overnight. They survive on deliveries of pizza, Mountain Dew, Red Bull and Doritos, working what Mr. Musk has described as 120-hour weeks.

At the General Services Administration, another central hub for Mr. Musk's aides, beds have been installed on the sixth floor, with a security guard keeping people from entering the area.

While most senior employees wear suits, the aides favor jeans, sneakers and T-shirts, sometimes under a blazer, with one sporting a navy-blue baseball cap with white lettering reading "DOGE."

The culture clash is evident. Perhaps unsurprisingly, career employees who have worked for decades in the government have bristled at taking orders from the young newcomers. One coder has openly referred to federal workers as "dinosaurs." Some staff members at the personnel office, in turn, derisively call the young men "Muskrats."

As they assess the workings of the government, Mr. Musk's aides have been conducting 15-minute video interviews with federal workers. Some of their questions have been pointed, such as querying employees about whom they would choose to fire from their teams if they had to pick one person. At times, the aides have not turned on their cameras or given their last names, feeding suspicion.

In one video interview heard by The Times, a young team representative who introduced himself by his first name said he was an "adviser" to government leadership and a startup founder. He pressed the interviewee to describe their contributions with "highest impact" and to list any technical "superpowers."

It is not always clear which employees are formally part of the team. Even the putative head of the department, Steve Davis, a decades-long lieutenant of Mr. Musk who has accompanied the billionaire on his meetings in Washington, has not been formally announced.

Steve Davis, right, has been a decades-long lieutenant of Mr. Musk and now seemingly has a leadership role in his Department of Government Efficiency. Patrick Fallon/Zuma, via Alamy

Many of Mr. Musk's aides, including Mr. Davis, hold multiple roles simultaneously, working for one of the team's central hubs — the personnel office or the General Services Administration — while also maintaining email addresses and offices at other agencies.

Luke Farritor, who won the award for using artificial intelligence to decipher an ancient scroll, joined Mr. Musk's initiative after dropping out of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln to pursue a fellowship funded by the billionaire PayPal founder Peter Thiel. A former SpaceX intern, Mr. Farritor, in preparation to join the team, started learning COBOL, a coding language considered retrograde in Silicon Valley but common in government.

Luke Farritor, a former University of Nebraska-Lincoln student and SpaceX intern, is one of many of Mr. Musk's aides who hold multiple roles simultaneously, working for one of the team's central hubs while also maintaining email addresses and offices at other agencies.
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

He and Rachel Riley, a former McKinsey consultant who works closely with Mr. Smith, are now both listed as employees in the Office of the Secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services. This week, they requested access to payment systems at the Medicare agency, according to a document seen by The Times.

Mr. Farritor, who also has email accounts at the General Services Administration, the Education Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, was at the Energy Department on Wednesday, and has told others that he is getting deployed to additional agencies. He is one of about a half-dozen aides who are holed up in a corner around the G.S.A. administrator's offices, interviewing tech staff members about their work.

The General Services Administration has served as a central hub for Mr. Musk's aides, with beds installed on the sixth floor and a security guard to keep people from entering. Graeme Sloan/Sipa, via AP Images

Other figures often on hand include Ethan Shaoiran and Edward Coristine, who have been accompanying a top Musk ally, Thomas Shedd, who oversees the agency's tech division. Mr. Shaoiran, a 22-year-old Harvard student, was part of a team that was the runner-up in a hackathon competition run by xAI last year.

Mr. Coristine, 19, graduated from high school in Rye, N.Y., last year, according to a school magazine that noted his outstanding performance on the Advanced Placement exams. Nowadays, he has an email address at the Education Department.

Before joining the government, Mr. Coristine was fired in June 2022 from an internship at Path, an Arizona-based data security company, after “an internal investigation into the leaking of proprietary company information that coincided with his tenure,” the company said in a statement Friday.

One Musk acolyte has leaned into his new status as a Washington celebrity.

Gavin Kliger, a newly minted senior adviser at the personnel office, wrote a Substack post this week titled “Why DOGE: Why I gave up a seven-figure salary to save America” — and asked users to pay a \$1,000-per-month subscription fee to read it.

The post behind the paywall appeared to have been left intentionally blank, according to users who saw it.

Mr. Kliger, 25, a software engineer, amplified a message posted on X in December by Nick Fuentes, one of the country’s most prominent young white supremacists, which mocked those who celebrate their interracial families. The post was removed from Mr. Kliger’s page after The Times inquired about it. He did not respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Kliger and Mr. Farritor were among those who obtained access to U.S.A.I.D. websites and tried to get into a secure area at the agency before being turned away by security last week, according to people familiar with the matter. After

midnight on Monday, Mr. Kliger sent an email from a U.S.A.I.D. email account informing thousands of staff members that the agency's headquarters would be closed.

On X, Mr. Kliger has defended cuts to the agency. He also responded to one person who criticized him as "one of the men carrying out Musk's coup."

"A 'coup' is when a duly elected president wins a democratic election and delivers on campaign promises," Mr. Kliger wrote on X on Monday. "Got it."

Reporting was contributed by Maggie Haberman, Mattathias Schwartz, Edward Wong, Erica L. Green, Madeleine Ngo, Zach Montague, Christopher Flavelle, Andrew Duehren, Brad Plumer, Kellen Browning and Aric Toler. Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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