

WSJ Print Edition

If Trump and Musk don't succeed in showing the bureaucracy who's boss, it's likely no one ever will.

America's Future Depends On DOGE

By Jeffrey A. Tucker

Critics view the Department of Government Efficiency's emails asking federal employees for evidence of productivity as chaotic, arbitrary and even cruel measures to impose on a devoted civil service. But Elon Musk is simply bringing normal private-sector standards to a government that desperately needs them. Since the Pendleton Act of 1883 introduced merit-based selection and civil-service job protections for federal workers, the administrative state has proliferated without sufficient checks and balances from the president or Congress.

The federal bureaucracy has ballooned from a few agencies to more than 400, many of which are "independent" of the president. Americans often view the president as responsible for the actions those agencies take. The system nudges new presidents to give up and go along. And that's exactly what they've done. No president—not Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan—has cracked this nut. Most reforms have made the administrative state larger, not smaller.

As we're seeing now, substantial opposition awaits anyone who challenges the bureaucracy. Unions are powerful. Intimidation from those with institutional knowledge can be overwhelming. Fear of the media has also been a deterrent to action. Every president has been at least somewhat fearful of the intelligence agencies. Industry leaders who have captured the agencies, including many campaign donors, have been too powerful to unseat or control.

Countless cabinet secretaries come and go with the intention of changing the system. They get big offices, a nice portrait and social status, but the bureaucrats know that the political appointees are temporary and easily can be ignored. Frustrated by institutional inertia, the appointees often leave outwitted, outgunned and demoralized.

Meanwhile, the American people feel increasingly oppressed, taxed, regulated, spied on, browbeaten, hectorated and harassed. Voting never made a difference because the politicians no longer controlled the system. The bureaucracies rule all. We've come to know this in our gut, which is why voters' trust in the system has eroded as agencies' power has built up.

The Biden years underscored this point. We didn't even need a conscious or active president, only a figurehead. Behind the scenes, institutions ran everything.

How can the U.S. deal with this problem? President Trump alone figured it out in his last term: He simply took charge of agencies in a limited way with selective firings, which he believed he had the legal authority to do. This unleashed howls of horror and whispers of plots from his critics, including in the media. Entrenched administrators hatched clever schemes to thwart his plans and show him who was boss—not the democratically elected president but the bureaucracy.

The message from today's civic elites is that the president's job is to pretend to be in charge while doing nothing meaningful. Shut up. Don't disturb the administrative state. Let it keep doing its thing without oversight or disruption, and you'll get your library and bestselling memoir.

Mr. Trump refuses this deal. In his second term, he's determined to slay the bureaucratic beast he knows all too well from his first term and the Biden years. DOGE's efforts are epic, breaking more than a century of acquiescence to the deep state. The Trump team is courageously confronting the problem head-on, come what may. Mr. Trump's allies know that they must act quickly and with some degree of ferocity, even recklessness, lest we default back to the status quo of leaders who pretend to be in charge while the embedded "men of the system"—to adapt a phrase from Adam Smith—run things behind closed doors.

It's critical that this bureaucracy gutting effort succeeds. There might never be another chance.

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