

# Trump Administration, Breaking With Musk's Directive, Says Replying to His Email Is Voluntary

*The response to Elon Musk's "What did you do last week?" email to federal employees suggests that there may be limits to how far he can push the government's work force.*

**By Michael D. Shear and Kate Conger**  
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Elon Musk's monthlong rampage through the federal bureaucracy appears to have met its first real test, as some of President Trump's top loyalists flatly reject the billionaire's demand that their employees justify their jobs or be summarily fired.

By Monday, just 48 hours after an email from Mr. Musk with the subject line "What did you do last week?" landed in the email boxes of millions of federal workers, personnel officials proclaimed the "request" to be voluntary even as Mr. Musk renewed his demand.

For the first time since the beginning of Mr. Trump's return to power, government employees appeared to be fending off, at least for now, an ambush in their war with the world's richest man. Even if the head-spinning series of events — contradictory tweets from Mr. Musk, comments from the president and emails from agency heads — left many of them confused.

After Mr. Musk's email, several agencies quickly sent out emails telling their employees they did not need to provide the five bullet points about their activity that he wanted.

"There is no H.H.S. expectation that H.H.S. employees respond to O.P.M., and there is no impact to your employment with the agency if you choose not to respond," said an email sent to employees at the Department of Health and Human Services, referring to the agency that sent Mr. Musk's request, the Office of Personnel Management.

The Department of Health and Human Services added that anyone who wanted to respond should "assume that what you write will be read by malign foreign actors and tailor your response accordingly."

At virtually the same time that employees were told a response was no longer necessary, Mr. Trump weighed in during a visit with President Emmanuel Macron of France, praising Mr. Musk's demand as "genius" and saying that employees who did not respond would be "semi-fired" or "fired."

Late Monday evening, Mr. Musk offered another twist on his social media site.

“Subject to the discretion of the President, they will be given another chance,” Mr. Musk wrote, apparently referring to federal employees who did not respond to his email by his original deadline of Monday at midnight. “Failure to respond a second time will result in termination.”

“The email request was utterly trivial, as the standard for passing the test was to type some words and press send!” he said in another post. “Yet so many failed even that inane test, urged on in some cases by their managers. Have you ever witnessed such INCOMPETENCE and CONTEMPT for how YOUR TAXES are being spent?”

Also on Monday, the Office of Personnel Management sent out a new memo reiterating the request and the deadline, though allowing agency heads to “exclude personnel from this expectation at their discretion.”

Until this weekend, Mr. Trump’s most senior officials had uniformly embraced Mr. Musk’s call for a smaller, more efficient government, free of what Republicans call “woke” ideology. Thousands of employees have been fired or put on leave. Entire agencies, like the U.S. Agency for International Development, have been all but shuttered. Remote workers have been told to return to the office or be fired.

But the response to the weekend email suggests that there may in fact be limits to how far Mr. Musk, acting on Mr. Trump’s behalf as the leader of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, can push the bureaucracy.

Across the executive suites of the federal agencies, the Musk email triggered concerns about turf and security. The message fractured Mr. Trump’s cabinet, with the leaders of some departments ordering their employees to comply and others directing workers to ignore the threat.

Chiefs of staff and personnel chiefs at the national security and intelligence agencies spent Saturday and Sunday trying to develop a coordinated response, according to a senior U.S. official familiar with the discussions. The result of that effort began when Kash Patel, Mr. Trump’s newly installed F.B.I. director, told the bureau’s employees to “pause any responses” to the Musk directive.

The official, who asked not to be identified in order to discuss internal deliberations, said there was some concern that Mr. Musk might lash out over the weekend on his social media platform. The official said the weekend’s activity added to anger at Mr. Musk among cabinet secretaries and agency heads for interfering with their departments.

The responses from several department heads made it clear that they were offended by the idea that an outsider was trying to take over their personnel decisions. Other responses indicated that agency heads were concerned that employees might reveal secret or even classified information in their responses to Mr. Musk.

At the C.I.A., senior officials did not put out a public statement, but some people at the agency were quietly instructed not to respond to Mr. Musk's email in the hopes that the problem would go away, according to a person familiar with the decision.

White House officials denied that there had been any impact on Mr. Musk's authority, or even any dissension among the president's top officials across the government.

"Everyone is working together as one unified team at the direction of President Trump," said Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary. "Any notion to the contrary is completely false."

A senior White House official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said that the fast-moving efforts by Mr. Musk and DOGE were "exactly the point" even if they ruffled some feathers inside the administration.

But the whiplash over the directives left many of the country's 2.3 million federal workers unsure exactly what they should do — even after Monday's reassurance from the Office of Personnel Management.

Even as televisions played Mr. Trump's comments lauding Mr. Musk, his personnel department informed agencies that responding to the Musk email was now "voluntary" and that failing to respond would not be considered a resignation, as Mr. Musk had indicated.

The dissent among the top ranks of Mr. Trump's administration was rare for a president whose demands for absolute loyalty have resulted in dramatic executive actions by his subordinates, all acting in lock step to quickly push through Mr. Trump's agenda.

Over the weekend, numerous top officials defied Mr. Musk, urging their employees to "pause" or "not respond" to the demand for a description of five things they did the previous week. Employees at the Departments of State, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security and Justice were all flatly told not to comply.

"For now, D.O.E. employees are asked to please pause on any direct response to the O.P.M. email," Energy Secretary Chris Wright said in a weekend email. A top State Department official wrote, "No employee is obligated to report their activities outside of their department chain of command."

At the same time, the president's handpicked leaders at the Treasury, the General Services Administration, the Department of Transportation and the Office of Management and Budget told employees to follow Mr. Musk's weekend directive. A Treasury email said, "You are directed to respond to this message before the deadline," adding that "we expect that compliance will not be difficult or time-consuming."

The split among advisers came just two days before Mr. Trump is set to convene his first full cabinet meeting of his second term at the White House on Wednesday. Eight years

ago, his first cabinet meeting turned into a session of gushing praise for Mr. Trump as his top aides extolled, as one put it, the “blessing” of working for the president.

That could still happen again on Wednesday. People in Mr. Trump’s current orbit have repeatedly sung his praises in recent weeks. After a meeting with Russian officials last week, Secretary of State Marco Rubio said over and over again that “Trump is the only leader who can bring peace to Ukraine.”

*Madeleine Ngo and Nicholas Nehamas contributed reporting from Washington.*