

IDEAS

THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE ENGINEER

The right claims to loathe technocracy—but it has empowered Elon Musk to remake the government.

By Franklin Foer

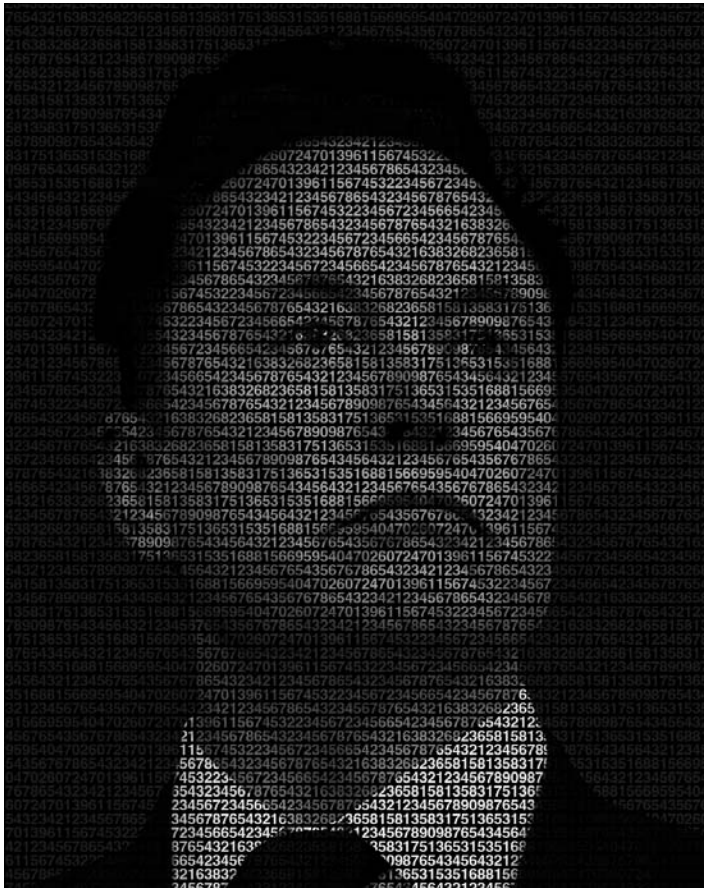


Illustration by Akshita Chandra / The Atlantic. Source: Chip Somodevilla / Getty.

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In the interior of a Washington, D.C., office building, with a small team of acolytes, Elon Musk is dismantling the civil service and fulfilling an old dream. Deep within the folds of the Western brain resides a yearning for a savior: a master engineer who imposes reason and efficiency on the messiness of modern life, who can deploy his

acumen to usher in a golden age of abundance and harmony. This is a fantasy of submission, where the genius takes charge.

Given American conservatives' recent rhetoric, their surrender to Musk's vision of utopia is discordant, to say the least. Ever since the pandemic, the MAGA movement has decried the tyranny of a cabal of self-certain experts, who wield their technical knowledge unaccountably. But even as the right purports to loathe technocracy, it has empowered an engineer to radically remake the American state in the name of efficiency.

Trumpists might be surprised to know that they are fulfilling a dream first conceived by a 19th-century French crank, Henri de Saint-Simon. A utopian polymath who fought in the American Revolution and claimed to be a descendant of Charlemagne, he imagined a society in which engineers and industrial managers usurped the aristocracy at the top of the pecking order. The ruling cadre of engineers, he theorized, wouldn't just solve social and economic problems, but serve as high priests, guiding society to efficiency, progress, and harmony. Technocracy and spirituality were intertwined in his doctrine, which he called the "New Christianity."

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In the last years of his life, Saint-Simon struggled to find a publisher for his books. His despair led him to shoot himself seven times in the head, a failed suicide attempt. Only after his death, in 1825, did he win cultlike devotion; his wider influence became unmistakable. Scholars dubbed him the "father of socialism," and his veneration of the engineer ricocheted through the history of the left, especially in its faith in centralized planning. "Master technology," Stalin famously implored his followers. "It is time that the Bolsheviks become experts." (Eventually, Stalin murdered and imprisoned those who followed this command.)

The worship of the engineer is not confined to any single strain of ideology. It's a modern impulse, and even ardent critics of the state have fallen victim to it. In *Atlas Shrugged*, every high-school libertarian's favorite novel, Ayn Rand's heroic protagonist,

John Galt, is an engineer whose solitary capacity for invention and heterodox thinking make him a sort of über-mensch. And there are hints of this same heroic self-conception in the right-wing swatches of present-day Silicon Valley. Engineers are prophets of a new order because they promise inventions that will usher in the purest expressions of freedom: realms (cryptocurrency, space colonies) that are beyond the reach of the state.

One pivotal figure in American political history briefly embodied the noblest aspirations for technocracy—President Herbert Hoover, nicknamed the Great Engineer. After training at Stanford, he made a fortune in the mining business. Hoover believed ardently in scientific management: Any procedure could be simplified through studying the data. By monitoring workers, the engineer could cull waste from the productive process. Born a Quaker, Hoover delivered lyrical descriptions of his life's work, which aren't so far from Saint-Simon's faith. Where other occupations were "parasitic," in Hoover's view, the engineer was the handmaiden of a humane social order because he "elevates the standards of living and adds to the comforts of life."

Tom Nichols: Trump and Musk are destroying the basics of a healthy democracy

At his best, Hoover's technocratic skills were something to behold. He was a genius at orchestrating responses to catastrophes; his coordination of food and supply shipments in Europe during World War I became the basis for his political mystique. Progressives were so enamored of his work that they desperately hoped he would run for president as a Democrat, so that they could preside over a new era of rational, well-organized government. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a fan before he became a foe, tried and failed to draft Hoover to run as his party's standard-bearer in 1920.

Elected as a Republican in 1928, Hoover was in the White House when the nation's economy collapsed. History regards him with disdain, less for his policies than for his distinct lack of warmth and his disregard for human suffering. He treated food distribution as an engineering problem, yet he never managed to describe victims with compassion. According to his biographer Joan Hoff Wilson, "They all became statistics—by the same impersonal scientific engineering approach and temperament that was to shock and dismay his fellow Americans during the Great Depression and erode his political credibility with them."

The problem with applying scientific management to the government is its hollow heart, as the former auto executive Robert McNamara later showed to horrifying effect. As the secretary of defense, he presided over the escalation of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, deploying a data-driven approach that rendered casualties in the vernacular of statistics. (McNamara didn't train as an engineer, but he self-consciously employed the mindset.) In his enthusiasm for optimization and efficiency, he paid no

heed to the terrible human toll of his immaculate systems.

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In a far more benign way, Jimmy Carter, the only other engineer to become president, struggled to form human connections with the public. As the *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker put it, he used an “engineer’s approach of devising ‘comprehensive’ programs on this subject or that, but repeatedly failed to mobilize public opinion in their support.” Carter’s brain was ill-equipped to process the irrationality of politics.

Despite this history of failure, Americans haven’t shaken the hope that some benevolent, hyperrational leader, immune to the temptations of political power, will step in to redesign the nation, to solve the problems that politicians can’t. That hope is unbreakable, because American culture invests engineers with the aura of wizardry. This is true for Elon Musk. For years, the media glorified him as a magician who harnessed the power of the sun, who revived the American space program, who rescued the electric car. Given that hagiographic press, some of it deserved, he could easily believe in his own ability to fix the American government—and think that a large chunk of the nation would believe that, too.

But in his short stay in Washington, Musk has already evinced the same moral shortcoming that afflicted Hoover and McNamara, the same inability to calculate the costs of cruelty. He has casually paused global aid programs that alleviate suffering; he has moved to destroy bureaucrats’ careers without concern for the rippling personal consequences. He has done this with an arrogance suffused with the spiritual self-certainty of Saint-Simon’s priestly caste of engineers. To a brain as rational as Musk’s, democracy is waste and inefficiency. The best system is the one bursting forth from his mind.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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