

Opinion **US politics & policy**

Beware Elon Musk's warped libertarianism

The billionaire entrepreneur's AI initiative is disturbing in light of his selective approach to political and civic freedoms

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Edward Luce YESTERDAY

Future generations might say that the big event of 2023 was when Elon Musk thought of TruthGPT — the “maximum truth-seeking AI” he plans to launch. Musk is many things — brilliant engineer, massive risk-taker, overgrown adolescent. One thing he is not is someone who can be trusted with a technology that could assume God-like influence over our lives. Nor is anyone for that matter. But the point about billionaire libertarians is that they have the money to do whatever they want.

There are roughly eight billion reasons why the rest of humanity should find that disquieting. We could start with the most basic: American libertarians should rarely be taken at face value. They generally share two characteristics. The first is that they are rich. It is as rare to find an impoverished libertarian as it is to find a wealthy socialist. The second reason is that their libertarianism rarely stretches beyond their personal freedoms, especially the liberty not to be taxed. Other people's freedom is their own lookout.

Once you accept that [Musk](#)'s world view seems to be that he should be allowed to do what he wants, his philosophical confusion ceases to matter. The same applies to many in his cohort, such as Peter Thiel, Ken Griffin and Charles Koch. Watch what they do, not what they say. Many of them subscribe to the outlook on life of Ayn Rand's epic individualist John Galt, the fictional character in *Atlas Shrugged*, whose

selfishness is presented as heroic. This novel's message is that extreme selfishness can be extremely moral.

Some of Musk's fellow billionaires support Donald Trump, who is the most un-libertarian figure in [US politics](#). If the former president is re-elected next year, he has promised to pass a federal ban on abortion, deport millions of illegal immigrants and impose a loyalty test on federal employees. He has vowed to be America's "retribution".

Little of this fits with commonsensical ideas of freedom. Many plausibly argue that Trump's return would spell the end of US liberal democracy. Not much of this seems to bother the libertarians. Trump, of course, enacted the largest corporate tax cut in US history – a \$2tn measure that disproportionately benefited the super-rich. That Musk is this week hosting [Ron DeSantis's presidential launch](#) on Twitter is a nuance. The Florida governor wants to be Trump without the personal drama.

Most billionaires, whether on the left or the right, think that they got rich because government stayed out of the way. You hear this account as much from Mark Zuckerberg's liberal friends as from conservatives. However, this is often convenient amnesia. Musk's Tesla, for example, received \$465mn of taxpayers' stimulus money in 2009. The research that resulted in Google's search engine was [funded by the National Science Foundation](#) in the 1990s. They seem like small numbers today but they were decisive when these big fish were minnows.

Libertarian free speech values are also selective. Among democracies, the US is unique in interpreting any curb on election spending as an attack on free speech. That means people like Musk have infinitely more speech than the average person. There are no limits on what they can contribute to their favourite causes or candidates. Peter Thiel's \$15mn was critical to JD Vance's success in winning an Ohio Senate seat last year. Both Thiel and Vance are admirers of Viktor Orbán, Hungary's self-styled illiberal prime minister.

Musk has converted Twitter into his idea of a free-speech platform. He alleged Twitter was censored by liberals prior to his \$44bn acquisition last year. To be sure, there were instances where flags were put on tweets that went against the rapidly evolving science on Covid, such as mask wearing, for example. Its guidelines were often arbitrary. Now, however, it is turning into a vehicle for Musk's id. Last week he tweeted that George Soros, the liberal billionaire, was a menace to civilisation: He "hates humanity", said Musk. Soros demonisation is a sure sign you are falling into dark conspiratorialism. See Orbán, Russian president Vladimir Putin or Benjamin

Netanyahu, Israel's premier.

Musk's love of free speech vanishes when it comes to China. I challenge readers to find one critical thing Musk has said about the most censored big society on earth. Twitter is blocked in China. But Tesla has a large plant in Shanghai and is planning to open another. "I'll say what I want to say and if the consequence of that is losing money, then so be it," said Musk when asked about his comments on Soros. That was badly misleading. Musk can tolerate losses on his Twitter vanity project. But he has bet the farm on Tesla. Criticising China would put Tesla's business model in jeopardy.

Musk, like Thiel, has the right to say what he likes and invest his money where he wants. Nothing in America is seriously threatening that. But this does not give him the right to be taken seriously. The sooner people see Musk's political motives for what they are, not what he claims them to be, the better for society's mental health. Even if he were right about government's failings, Washington needs to put a titanium fence around AI.

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